

This book documents many painful stories of living with chronic, hopeless hunger; the anguish of not being able to feed oneself or one's loved ones; the impact of prolonged deprivation and recurring uncertainty about food availability; the loss of dignity in securing food through foraging and begging; the desperation of debt bondage and low end, humiliating and exploitive, highly underpaid work; and the sacrifice of other survival needs like medicine. It attempts to understand these through listening to the experiences as recounted by destitute persons from intensely food insecure social groups themselves – specifically aged people without care givers, single women headed households, and adults with disability – in villages in Orissa, Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh.



NATIONAL BOOK TRUST, INDIA



Cover painting Poornam Sahi

# LIVING WITH HUNGER

HARSH MANDER

with M. Kumaran, Archana Rai and Arpan Tulsyan



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**Harsh Mander**



## Introduction

In the dark shadows of this land, the silent tragedy plays out, of millions of women and men, boys and girls, who sleep hungry. The experience of chronic hunger in distant villages of India, as much as on its city streets, is one of intense avoidable suffering; of self-denial; of learning to live with far less than the body needs; of minds and bodies stymied in their growth; of the agony of helplessly watching one's loved one's—most heartbreakingly children—in hopeless torment; of unpaid, arduous devalued work; of shame, humiliation and bondage; of the defeat and the triumph of the human spirit.

This is a book which tells the stories of how millions of destitute women and men, boys and girls, live with hunger in our land. It is the outcome of a year-long study of chronic food deprivation, rural destitution and hunger in Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Rajasthan, among aged people, single women and people with disability. We found that these most destitute individuals survive harsh, protracted and hopeless want in many ways, by simply denying themselves and reducing their food intake over prolonged periods; or by foraging for food in forests and eating food other people would normally shun; by sending even small children out to work, even in conditions of bondage, so that they are fed; by selling their scant belongings; and always as a last resort, by begging. This book speaks of the ways they cope with lives of unremitting want of hunger.

Such high levels of hunger and malnutrition are a paradox, because they stubbornly survive surging economic growth, and agricultural production which outpaces the growth of population (although it has worryingly stagnated in recent years). The riddle



deepens because the State in India runs some of the largest and most ambitious food schemes in the world. The persistence of widespread hunger is the cumulative outcome of public policies that produce and reproduce impoverishment; of failures to invest in agriculture especially in poorer regions of India and for rain-fed and small farmers; of unacknowledged and unaddressed destitution; of embedded gender, caste, tribe, disability and stigma which construct tall social barriers to accessing food; but in the last analysis it is the result of a profound collapse of governance.

The colonial Famine Codes continue to cast a long shadow over responses of the State to hunger, even though both the nature of famine and the political economy of the State have been completely transformed in free India. They continue to regard starvation as a temporary aberration caused by rainfall failures rather than an element of daily lives. The effort remains to craft minimalist responses, to spend as little money as is absolutely necessary to keep people threatened with food shortages alive. And the duties of State officials are not legally binding, in ways that they cannot be punished for letting citizens live with and die of hunger.

Allegations of starvation deaths are typically met by official denials and the blaming of the victims. Public servants believe mistakenly that death from consuming no food whatsoever is the only 'proof' of starvation. But starvation is a condition of not just the dead but the living, and people who have lived with prolonged food denials mostly succumb not directly to starvation, but to health conditions which they would have easily survived had they been adequately nourished. There are seamless lines between dying of and living with starvation, prolonged food denials, malnutrition, and the subjective experience of hunger. Starvation is closely related to the equally neglected phenomenon of destitution, in which people lack even the minimal economic means for bare survival. The State must acknowledge these conditions, identify people threatened by them, and address and prevent the enormous and avoidable toll of suffering, sickness and death that they entail.

The State in India implements massive food, livelihood and social security programmes—some of the largest in the world—which theoretically support vulnerable people from even before their birth to their survivors after death. Expectant mothers are fed in ICDS centres, along with infants, children up to the age of six and adolescent girls. The child in school gets school meals. As adults, women receive maternity support, bread earners are guaranteed 100 days of wage employment in public works; and if identified to be poor, they can buy subsidised cereals from a massive network of half a million ration shops. The aged—and in many states widows and disabled people—are given pensions. And if an earning adult dies prematurely, the survivor is entitled to insurance.

These programmes are plagued by corruption, leakages, errors in selection, delays, poor allocations and little accountability. They also tend to discriminate against and exclude those who most need them, by social barriers of gender, age, caste, ethnicity, faith and disability; and State hostility to urban poor migrants, street and slum residents, and unorganised workers.

\* \* \*

Public policy—and even much of civic action and mainstream academia—do not adequately acknowledge or address the unconscionable reality of the unrelentingly precarious, lonely, humiliating and uncertain existence of women and men, boys and girls who grapple with critical hunger, chronic food denials and starvation as a part of their lived everyday experience. If their suffering is admitted, they tend to be blamed for it, as the 'undeserving' poor.

This links closely with the neglected chronic, invisible, malaise of destitution. Destitute people are those who almost completely lack the resources, financial and material, the employment, assets, access to credit, and social and family support and networks, which are required to secure the means for dignified survival. These are



men and women, girls and boys who are powerless and disenfranchised, socially isolated and devalued, sometimes stigmatised and even illegalised, and often with special needs born out of disability, illness, social standing and age.

For large numbers of these forgotten people who live routinely and precariously at the edge of the survival, each day comes afresh with the danger of one push that will hurtle them down the precipice. This may come from an external emergency, like a natural disaster, epidemic or riot, but even from local crises: a sickness in the family, a sudden untimely death of a bread earner, or a brush with the law. These people who live on a regular basis in constant peril of slipping into starvation—or at least chronic, long term, unaddressed hunger—may be described as destitute.

Karl Marx wrote evocatively of the exclusion of destitute populations from what he described as 'political economy':

Political economy does not recognise the unoccupied worker... The beggar, the unemployed, the starving [and] the destitute are figures which exist not for it, but only for the eyes of doctors, judges, gravediggers and beadles. Nebulous... figures which do not belong within the province of political economy.<sup>1</sup>

Incidentally, Marx was right about their exclusion, but not about their being 'unoccupied workers'. On the contrary, we have found that the destitute are forced to labour in arduous, low paid, undignified work in order even to stay barely alive as each new day dawns.

In a perceptive paper, Barbara Harriss White tries to unravel the features and sources of destitution. First, it involves the absence of any control over assets and the loss of access to income from one's own labour. This loss of control may result from mishaps,

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Barbara Harriss-White in 'Destitution in India', a paper for the Conference Inequality, Poverty and Well Being, Helsinki, Finland, 30-31 May 2003

addictions, disasters, health emergencies, and collapse or withdrawal of family support.

A plausible sequence involves the progressive liquidation of small stock, livestock, consumer goods and eventually the failure to protect from sale the key productive assets... The right to the asset of one's own labour (may be) forfeited. This right may be sold to others. The concept of dependence may be transformed and the labour of non-labouring dependents sold or bonded. The most extreme tactics do not involve the sale of labour so much as the marketing of the body itself (as in the sale of blood or of organs or the renting of the body as in sex work).<sup>2</sup>

\* \* \*

The destitution and helplessness of very marginalised groups do not arise frequently from low incomes or even from their own intrinsic and irrevocable biological infirmities (such as of age and disability), but by the fact that in many cases these infirmities are externally imposed, by social arrangements themselves. There are some echoes of this idea in some of the recent literature on social exclusion. Whereas concepts such as poverty, vulnerability, deprivation and inequality do not impute causality, a social exclusion framework implies not only that a person or persons are being excluded but that someone or something 'is doing the excluding'<sup>3</sup>. The word exclusion suggests that there is a core and a periphery, and that 'excluded' people are those who are actively blocked access to the core. The importance of these perspectives is that poverty is not perceived to be a mere attribute of certain categories of people. Instead, it is seen as something that is actively *done* to people. It is not what they are, but what they have been

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Harriss-White *ibid*

<sup>3</sup> De Haan, A. (1998) 'Social Exclusion: an Alternative Concept for the Study of Deprivation?' *IDS Bulletin*, 29(1), p.10.



made. It is interesting that the ex-untouchables of India have discarded the appellation given to them by Gandhi – *harijan*, meaning children of God – which they regard as patronising. They prefer *dalit* – which means one who is crushed – because the term implies that they have been oppressed, and it has therefore acquired a cultural context of assertion and anger. In this sense, the term exclusion is useful.

So also is the word social. The most evolved definition of food security so far at the time of writing that we could locate in the literature appears in the State of Food Insecurity 2001:

Food security [is] a situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. (emphasis added by the author)

The inclusion in the definition of 'social' access is highly significant, because it acknowledges that people may be barred from access to food even if it is locally available and they have the economic means. These social barriers to food security may include gender, caste, race, disability or stigmatised ailments.

\* \* \*

The expulsion of those who most need it, from support and succour, from care and rights—often by their own families, by local communities, but most importantly by the State – requires us to identify those classes, social categories and local communities, who are destitute and socially expelled. Even in the more intimate context of a village, many of these socially excluded groups are invisible, barely known and acknowledged. In most contemporary cultural contexts, social categories that consistently tend to be very dispossessed and vulnerable in their access to food include disabled people, both as bread winners and dependents; single women and

the households that they head; aged people especially those who are left behind when their families migrate or who are not cared for by their grown up children; people with stigmatised and debilitating ailments such as TB, HIV AIDS and leprosy; working and out of school children; and bonded workers. In addition, in diverse cultural and socio-economic contexts, others may be added, such as certain denotified and nomadic tribes in one place, some specially disadvantaged dalit groups like Musahars or Madigas in another, weavers, artisans and particularly disadvantaged minority groups in yet another, all designated 'primitive tribal groups', survivors of conflict and internal displacement, and many other diverse forgotten people. Many of them are of contested citizenship.

In the bridge between rural and urban destitute are the distress migrants, at the bottom of the heap both where they move for work, and from where they come. In urban contexts are street children, with or without responsible adult caregivers, urban homeless people, slum dwellers and a wide range of unorganised workers, both seasonal migrants and settlers, such as rickshaw pullers, porters, loaders, construction workers and small vendors, and people dependent on begging.

Government programmes are woefully inadequate to address destitution; in fact they tend to be blind to or in denial of the fact that large numbers of people lack even the elementary means and power to survive with dignity. It is stressed that this is a duty of the State not to the dead, but to the precariously living. It requires public vigilance about individuals, communities and several categories living with starvation and absolute hunger. It requires the State to act, not after there is an emergency like a drought or flood, not even *after* people die of starvation, but pro-actively before people slip into destitution, and fail to access in an assured and reliable manner, with dignity, the nutritious and culturally appropriate food they require to lead healthy lives.

Gandhi offered us a 'talisman' to use in moments of doubt and confusion. He asked us to recall the face of the poorest, most



defenceless, most powerless man we have encountered. (Today he would have recognised that she would probably have been a woman!). Ask ourselves whether what we are attempting has meaning for this person: does it touch her life with dignity and worth? Does it augment her power and self-reliance? If it does, it must surely be the right thing to do. It is this talisman that we need to hold up to public policy.

New Delhi

**Harsh Mander**  
Centre for Equity Studies

## A LIFE OF CHRONIC HUNGER

This report seeks to illustrate the experience of living with chronic hunger. This includes prolonged deprivation of sufficient food to lead a healthy and active life, recurring uncertainty about the availability of food, loss of dignity in securing food for bare subsistence through involuntary resort to foraging and begging, debt bondage and low-end, highly underpaid work, self-denial and sacrifice of other survival needs like medicine because of pressing circumstances. It attempts to understand these phenomena through listening to experiences recounted by destitute persons from intensely food insecure social groups themselves—specifically aged people without caregivers, single women-headed households, and adults with disability—in eight villages in Orissa, Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh.<sup>1</sup> It attempts to describe these people's experiences of living with hunger as expressed, recalled and interpreted by them.

A study of this nature required recourse to a methodology founded resolutely on the principles of empathy and respect. The eclectic methodology is detailed in a later chapter of this report. But its major point of departure was that it relied upon, as principal researchers, persons who themselves belonged to the food-insecure and dispossessed groups, namely single women, disabled adults and aged people who had no one to take care of them. Teams were constituted of six researchers in each state, all of whom belonged

1 Yerravalli, Narayanpur and Athveli villages in Vikarabad mandal of Ranga Reddy district in Andhra Pradesh; Buromal and Ankamara villages in Khaprakhol block of Bolangir district in Orissa; and Kodyagund, Manatgaun Chundavada and Holilomda Hiraka in Dungarpur and Bichivada blocks of Dungarpur district in Rajasthan.



to indigent families in the villages included in the research, and of whom half were from the specific, highly vulnerable groups selected for in-depth study and half were women. They were trained in relevant basic research methodologies and ethics, and supported and coordinated by one researcher in each state equipped with the more conventional skills of formal training and education. This coordinator was intended primarily to be a scribe for the community researchers. These researchers verbally recounted their conversations and observations each evening in their teams, and these were recorded by each research coordinator. The teams spent one month each living by turn in each village, during the first six months of 2007, meeting and talking to persons from these three most vulnerable groups. Since these individuals are often socially isolated and sometimes stigmatised, they are often 'invisible' in that many residents do not acknowledge, and are often not even aware of, their existence. Therefore, we relied a great deal on processes of 'snowballing,' in which a person from a highly disadvantaged group would lead us to another, and she would lead us to yet another, and so on.

Although this report relies primarily on extended interviews conducted over several sittings by community researchers with destitute people they located in these villages, it was followed and supplemented by a more conventional quantitative study, also conducted with the help of the community researchers, in which we tried to interview aged people without caregivers, single women and people with disability whom we could find in the villages selected for the study. A total of 474 persons were surveyed of whom 135 were people with disabilities, 194 single women and 145 aged people. Given the frequent overlaps between these identities, the report of this survey first looks at the findings for all the respondents collectively, and then at each of them separately. To retain the centrality of the voices and their constructions of their own lived realities, the main body of the report only infrequently supplements its findings with those of the quantitative study. But the report of

the quantitative study is included in its entirety as a separate chapter in this book.

There are, of course, serious limits to how much we actually measured up to our goal of executing social science research as an exercise in empathy, due to our own limitations. But all the research coordinators (who were formally educated and from middle class backgrounds) were struck by the degree of sensitivity and insight which the often unlettered or barely formally educated community researchers brought to the research. They acknowledged that if they were to have conducted this investigation without their support, they would not have been able to reach and build a similar rapport with the respondents, nor would they have had 'the eye to see, the ear to hear and indeed the heart to grieve' with the people who live with such enormous deprivation.

The community researchers, for their part, said that they initially missed their homes during their stay in other villages for the research. But months later, they sorely missed the work. Sarojini, a single woman abandoned by her husband, who lives with her old father, said she could not forget the sorrowful stories she heard. Dhuleshwar said: 'I felt amazed that I lived in the same village, but did not know the situation of my people.' Abhisuna, advanced in years, was a bonded labourer in his youth, and his son continues to migrate each year in semi-bonded conditions. He said: 'I am unlettered. But I was constantly reminded that I have a lot of knowledge, experience and wisdom. I liked that.' His son Brindavan agrees: 'My father did not get many chances in life. I am happy he had this experience'. Saudamini, another single woman researcher, said she learnt 'new dimensions of sadness'. Tapeswar added: 'We were humbled by how brave many of the people we met were. Facing the most unbelievable odds, and with no help whatsoever from their families, from the community or from the government, they were still not defeated.'

The researchers were also constantly reminded by the destitute people they encountered of the severe limits of empathy. An elderly



widow in Andhra Pradesh, Ashiya Begum, said: 'Even if I tell you (what we eat to survive), will you ever be able to *feel* what we eat?' A widow in Rajasthan, Mani, was convinced that: 'You cannot even imagine what I went through when I used to come back after work late at night and I could hear my younger daughter wailing because of hunger, and my elder daughter, still a small child, waiting patiently with her empty stomach.' When the research coordinator met an elderly widow Nrupati (who sadly died a few months after the research), he said that he too had a grandmother like her. She cried in reply: 'But your grandmother would have a good house, a place to seat you, and good food to offer. I have nothing.' Some we spoke to did not know where to start. 'What should I say about my life?' asked M. Bhimamma, a widow in Vikarabad, Andhra Pradesh: 'It is too full of problems.' Many were initially reluctant to speak. A disabled man in Rajasthan remarked self-disparagingly: 'Everybody knows I am poor. What is there to know in a poor man's life? Except that I am also partially blind and deaf.' Yet we observed that after repeated visits, the researchers were mostly welcomed warmly, especially since many of the people they spoke to were socially isolated and devalued, and over time, genuine and enduring bonds grew on both sides. The researchers also assisted the respondents to access their entitlements from the government and to organise assistance for them from the local community.

Generalisations are perilous not only because each human experience is unique, but as there is enormous heterogeneity within and between each social category of destitute people included in this research, and a wide diversity of locations and cultures. Single women may be widows, separated, divorced or never married. Moreover, as we will observe, there is a vast difference in how young women who lose their spouses are treated as compared to older widows. There is a layered, complex, cultural hierarchy of stigma. Aged people may be single or living with their spouses. The absence of caregivers may be because children have migrated due to penury or the aged may be neglected even when staying together with

their children under the same roof. Disability is also of many physiological varieties with different kinds of social stigma attached. One can be impaired in hearing, limbs and mobility, sight, intelligence or emotional stability, or a multiplicity of these. One can also be disabled and yet a bread earner or dependent, with a family or alone.

Each of these conditions is as much biologically as socially constructed, and the social exclusion that people face are often far less the product of physiology and more of social construction. For instance, a person with leprosy may be much more stigmatised than a physically disabled (say, blind) person, and a woman always more than a man. An assertive single woman may be branded a witch, whereas one who is socially compliant is seen to be deserving of charity. Aged persons in one cultural context may be revered as repositories of wisdom and experience, and in another seen as dispensable and a burden. Many of those we interviewed in this research belonged to more than one category: there were impoverished, aged, single women who were also disabled, for instance, and this led to a thick layering of a range of disadvantages, the combined burden of which they had to carry.

Even admitting of all this diversity, this research encountered a remarkable overlap of human experience and structural contexts of people who live with hunger, insecurity and prolonged, profound deprivation, associated with social devaluation and isolation. It is these patterns that we seek to excavate and translate into social action against hunger.

### **Intense Chronic Food Denials**

Nothing had prepared all of us who were associated with the research, including the community researchers, for the extent of food deprivation that we encountered, that the aged, single women, people with disability and their dependents routinely live with. Arkhit, an elderly widower from Orissa, cooks rice once a day, and that too only if he is able to muster the energy and will. If not, he



just prepares black tea, drinks it and sleeps. The water left over from the rice, when he cooks it the night before, is his meal the next morning. For the elderly couple Champo and Minzi, too, their staple food is *baasi* (fermented rice water cooked one day earlier), and *bhaaji* (green leaves gathered from the forest). On good days, they are able to supplement this by spending a maximum of two rupees on potatoes, onions and dried fish. They barter some of the rice they get when they beg in the grocery shop for tiny measures of oil, sugar, tea and *dal*. Minzi pointed to her faded green sarree which was almost in tatters: 'I bought this when we had a good *mahua* crop in the forests last year.' One morning when we visited them, they had eaten stale rice water and one tiny dried fish, which both husband and wife shared in equal part. Many days they just drink tea or sleep on an empty stomach. Lentils or *dal* with their rice is a rarity, and they could not recall having eaten this over the past month.

For the elderly Somaiah in Athveli village, most days are preoccupied with finding some *dal* to eat with boiled rice. Usually, he asks for this from his neighbours, who on occasion share some *dal* from their kitchens but add water to it. In all states, many aged people reported informally going to the village government school and begging for a little *dal* or *sambhar* (spiced lentil soup) from the mid-day meal prepared for the school students. Aged widow Malti Bariha craves for curry with her rice, but cannot afford the spices. She sometimes does not have the energy even to collect enough firewood, so even the sparse rice and potato that she customarily eats is at times half-cooked.

When it was discovered that Dhonu Badiya suffered from leprosy fourteen years ago, his brother turned him out of his home, and he was reduced to surviving by begging. He lived alone in a small hut at the edge of their fields in Burumal village, in the chronically drought-ravaged district of Bolangir in Orissa. Years later, the health worker insisted that he was cured, and his brother finally relented and gave him shelter in an open verandah near the cowshed

of their home. His life's belongings are one frayed change of clothes strung on a rope, and a couple of dented aluminium vessels. The food his brother gives him in return for grazing his goats in the scrub hill near the village is small quantities of *baasi*. It takes Dhonu more than an hour to painfully scoop up this liquid with his fingerless hands and bring it to his mouth. His life's biggest but distant dream is for a pension from the government so that he can buy enough food to fill his stomach—solid food that he can eat with dignity—and soap to clean his body.

Punja Nanoma from Dungarpur, Rajasthan, recalls that in his younger days, when no work was available, he would spend the day illegally gathering wood from the forests and selling it in the village market. With this, he would buy a kilogram of maize and rush home to give his wife Puja and children their only meal of the day. They would sometimes cook this into a broth called *raabri*, rather than rotis, to make it go around further. The forests also gave them wild shrubs like *puar*, *hama*, *kodra* and *kuuti*. But with age, the forests are depleted and the distances too far to traverse daily. There are days when they just eat the wild *mahua* pods, and when even these are spent, both husband and wife sleep hungry.

Widowed early, Antamman often could muster only enough food for one meal for the family, and they lived on only a cup of black tea at night. Her children abandoned her when she grew in years. She confesses that most of each day, her thoughts centre on how she will procure her next meal. There are times she wants to beg, but is restrained as she worries that people will gossip when her back is turned. She once went and ate in the local school's mid-day meal scheme, but felt guilty afterwards that she had eaten the children's share of food. Another widow, Ashiya Begum, recalls that their regular meal was of *gongura* (a wild leafy vegetable) with chutney made of boiled wild tamarind and a pinch of salt. She sometimes stole corn from unguarded fields, because: 'when one is hungry, one feels only hunger, no guilt, no shame.' When widow Mani Yadav cannot get work even after begging, and her



government pension is depleted, she drinks tea and hot water to feel that her stomach is full.

Sankari, an Oriya widow, used to collect bamboos that were soft and small which she crushed into a paste for her family. Another frequent meal was of *kaddi*—a poisonous wild plant—which she cut into small pieces and pressed into a basket which she immersed in the river for a day. The river water drained away some of the poison and the family got its food. It tasted foul, so she mixed it with jaggery and salt. June and July were good months for Sankari as she managed to collect wild fruits (*thol* and *kusum*) and exchange them for broken rice and salt. During the monsoons alone, the whole family was able to taste meat as she collected snails and cleaned these to extract some flesh after hours of toil, a handful of meat which the children relished. When she was able to get work in the fields, she was paid one and half kilograms of *mahuat*. But now that she is alone, her main source of food is her pension, which she spends fully on buying rice. However, this rice is not enough to last the whole month.

Indradeep, an aged, disabled man, says he and his family survived the onslaught of repeated droughts only due to the forests, from where they foraged anything that was edible, things that only poor people ate like *kuddo* (a weed that is boiled and then drunk), and seeds of bamboo flowers, again boiled and eaten. As a child, Indradeep hated the taste, but still ate these as there was no other option. The taste was so revolting that Indradeep says: 'One can eat it only when one is very hungry.' But the forests are too far and steep to rescue him from hunger at this age.

Kava Manat of Rajasthan was born with congenital disease in which both his legs were conjoined. He tells us that till his parents were alive, they used to look after him and gave him food, but life was not easy even during those times. Food was difficult to come by but 'my parents were my life-givers: they shielded me from hunger, from being roofless.' His dominant memories of his childhood are days of intense hunger, days of eating *kodra*, *somi* and *bhatti* (wild

shrubs); after eating these, his stomach would ache with intolerable gripes and cramps. When there was no food, his parents used to collect wood from Gujarat, walking for one and a half days each way. As he was disabled, he could not walk and helplessly waited for his family to return with food, for at least three days at a time, often longer. He then learnt the bitter lessons of hunger. He had no clothes, just one cloth to wrap around and then use as a coverlet in the night. When it got cold on winter nights, they used to burn wood and sleep on the warm grass to fight the cold.

Until his parents were alive, his three brothers also used to take care of him, but once his parents passed away, things started changing. His father had instructed his other sons to look after Kava as he could not take care of himself on his own. His brothers feed him now, but in return he has to graze their cattle, struggling each day with his disability, dragging himself everywhere on his hands. When we asked him whether he got enough to eat, Kava was silent for a few moments. Then he said that whatever is leftover in his brothers' kitchens is given to him: sometimes it means just half a *chappati* and often he sleeps hungry.

Sankari is a grizzled old woman, blind in one eye and with fading eyesight in the other. At the age of two, Sankari became an orphan, and was brought up by her grandmother and grandfather. Her grandfather was a *halia* or bonded labourer, who was fed by their landlord employer and paid a token amount of paddy every year. They lived near the forests, and Sankari accompanied her grandmother in her quest for food from an early age. It was also her grandmother's way of initiating her into a life of self-sufficiency, showing her how to sustain herself when there is no food in the house, lessons that were to prove immensely helpful to Sankari later in life and helped her keep herself and her children alive. During intense droughts, when the forests were scorched and shrivelled, their main worry and thoughts revolved obsessively around how to find their next meal, and it was not unusual for both granddaughter and grandmother to sleep hungry.



Udiya Bariha, now frail and wasted at 75 years, lost both her eyes as a child to small pox. She became an orphan at the age of fifteen, and says: 'From that day till now I am struggling, yet death has not come to my door.' Alone, she has survived 60 long years of unmitigated want after her father died. All these years later, she says it is still difficult for her to light a fire on her mud stove. Udiya trudges most days to the forest to collect dry wood for fuel and to sell; then she cooks rice and eats it with water and spinach. In the evening, she goes to clean cowsheds and in return gets cooked rice. On days when she is not able to go anywhere due to exhaustion or illness, she begs in the village for food, and eats her lunch in the village school, soliciting from the mid-day meal served to school students.

Our survey of hunger among these destitute and deprived categories revealed that 62 per cent of them had eaten no food in the morning of the survey, 29.5 per cent had a partial meal and only 7.3 per cent reported eating a full meal. As few as 6 per cent of them had a full lunch, 72 per cent had a partially filling lunch, whereas 21 per cent involuntarily fasted for lunch. Those who ate a partial meal increased to 86 per cent at night, and the numbers who ate well and not at all were both 7 per cent. It must be remembered that even these meals which we observed over several months were very austere, mainly bare cereals, boiled rice or dry *rotis*, with little oil, vegetables, *dal*, meat, and even fewer sweets.

Intense food shortages often demand the most unreasonable choices such as between food and medicines, between eating to save life and relieving unbearable pain. Most people report that their most hazardous tumble into pauperisation is because they, or a loved one, fell gravely ill. Many old people simply try to wait out an attack of illness. If that does not work, they consult a local, untrained practitioner who demands his fees in advance, never guaranteeing a cure. They do this by cutting back their food intake even further from the rock bottom levels to which it plummets,

even in 'normal' times. Tanudeep says the local health practitioners blame them for their continued sickness, attributing it to their 'foolishness', especially in not eating well enough or not buying enough medicines. Champo was sick a week earlier, and his wife Minzi managed to beg for a loan from the local shopkeeper to pay for the 'doctor's' fees and medicines, while she fed him rice water mixed with salt. 'But if I have 50 rupees, it is better that I spend it on food than on medicines', she said to us. 'People like us get well not by poking our arms with needles, or swallowing tablets, but just by eating good food. The rest is in the hands of the One above,' she maintained.

Many testified that of all denials of food, the hardest to bear was to one's children. Sheikh Gaffar, an elderly man in Andhra Pradesh, confides his anguish when his granddaughter: 'takes a fancy to something and demands it. Shamim, her mother, gives her a slap by painfully raising her paralysed hand, and the child who is too young to understand the limitations of poverty, sobs herself to sleep.' Laibani, a separated mother in Ori, laments that when her children: 'see the neighbours' children eating biscuits, snacks or chocolates, they come to me and ask me for it. If I have some money or rice, then I give them something to eat. If not, then I try to explain the situation to them by promising them something in the near future, a promise I know I will not be able to keep.'

Ashiya Begum worked as a road construction labourer after her husband's death. She recalls that when the workers used to have lunch by the construction site, she tried to sleep under the bushes as there was no food and it was better than seeing others eat. When the pangs of hunger grew insistent, she would drink a lot of water, tie her saree end tightly around her stomach and continue to work. At night, if the children cried and she had nothing to feed them, she peeped out of her tent into her neighbours' utensils and beg for a glass of *ganji* (water drained out of rice once it is cooked) from them. Everybody got 5-6 spoonfuls of *ganji* before sleeping. Sometimes in the evening, after the road construction





work, she cooked in other people's houses. They gave her four *rotis* that the entire family ate. She insists that if the poor have to live, they have to learn to beg for food.

Mani would forcefully breastfeed her younger daughter and then leave her the whole day in the care of her older daughter, barely a year older. They waited desperately for her to return with some food, and Mani herself lost count of the times she had to sleep hungry. Kamala sets aside some money from her earnings from brewing illicit liquor to buy new clothes for her daughters, but never for herself. 'Of what use are new clothes to me? If I wear new clothes, people will say that this widow is on the prowl, looking for a man,' she says bitterly.

#### Destitution, Social Devaluation and Loneliness

Most of the intensely destitute people we met in the course of this study live not just with the affliction of prolonged hunger, but also the daily ordeal of profound loneliness. They are socially isolated and devalued in a variety of ways, and each of these deprivations both causes and reinforces the isolation. When we visited Urmila, a grey-haired and disabled widow, in her home, a hen was wandering in her courtyard. Urmila said: 'Look at this foolish hen. She knows I have nothing to give her, but still she comes to me. Don't shoo her away, as she is my only guest.' She poignantly evokes her own sense of loss and longing: 'My hunger is not only for food but also for love.' But paradoxically she is also terrified of people, confining herself most times to her home, and avoiding the main streets even when she goes out to bathe in the river. 'I am scared because I am alone,' she says.

For Kava Manat, disabled from birth, dragging himself indefatigably on his calloused hands, life's greatest regret is that he could never marry and have a family of his own. If he had a partner, he would have had someone to share life's joys and sorrows with, with whom he could have travelled through life with dignity and support. He would then not have been so anxious about his future.



He says: 'Poverty and hunger not only kill a person, they also destroy one's self-esteem.'

Antamma, an old widow abandoned by the children she brought up through great struggle, says she skips celebrating smaller festivals, but bigger festivals like Sakranti, Diwali and Holi she celebrates just with herself, in her own way, within her own means. She does it by eating a little more rice, or maybe treating herself by cooking a quarter kilogram of vegetables. Sajna Nag, a secluded, ageing widow says: 'I now do not know when festivals come and go. But when my husband was alive, I used to await these eagerly.' Lakshamma, furious at her sons' neglect of her, escapes during festivals to the fields where she sits alone and weeps, nostalgically recalling the past and cursing her sons.

Laibani Manjhi, abandoned after she acquired goitre, refuses to attend social functions because she fears that she will be taunted both for her goitre growth and her husband's desertion. Leprosy patients like Vali and Dhanu are never invited for any celebrations. Dhanu is shy in gatherings, and never leaves his home except to graze the goats, his only companions. He never joins others to watch entertainments like the *nautanki*. When he walks past people, women snatch away their children in dread of his touch.

Old people living alone sometimes spend days without speaking to anyone. It is a burden to cook for oneself alone, especially for old men who are culturally unaccustomed to looking after themselves, and therefore it is not uncommon for them to drink water and try to sleep on many nights. Men who lose their wives at an old age often do not know how to cook, and how to manage to find food to fill their stomachs when there is no money to buy food. It is better when a couple grows old together, but as one Rajasthani woman said: 'How long can old people talk, remembering their old days?' They are constantly haunted by the fear that their partner may fall sick or die, or that they may themselves become incapacitated and a burden to the other. 'It is okay until one's hands and feet work, but what will happen if we are bound to the cot one day?' she asks.

Loneliness may also be fostered by pride, as with venerable ninety year-old widow Police Thirumatamma in Andhra Pradesh, widely respected in the village. Her brothers have often invited to live with them, but she refuses. 'I have never depended on people's pity. I lived on my own and will die on my own,' she says. When her husband was alive, Thirumatamma cooked food in huge quantities on all festivals and extended an open invitation to all villagers to the feast. Today, privately, her composure wavers: 'I have never begged, but I fear that the day will come when I will be compelled to stretch out my hand for food. I always feel so hungry nowadays, but there is no full meal to eat.' She continues: 'I can go to my sister's son's place but I would not like to. I have done so much for them in the past. Our relationship is harmonious, and by going to them to eat, I don't want to ruin it.' Her meals have reduced from three to two, and from full to half meals. She cannot eat rice both times, but instead has to substitute it with coarse millet *jowar* for one meal. The *sitaphal* tree in her garden was available for children to eat its fruits for free, now she has to sell them at one rupee each. She cannot cook sometimes as she is old and cannot see at night, so has to sleep with water in her belly instead of food. But she refuses to bend so far.

Migrating to a city to find work is a closed option for most people we interviewed because of age and infirmity. There were some whose children did migrate, but although this helped them survive, it left them alone. Aged and disabled, Indradeep, in Bolangir, depends on the occasional remittances sent by his son Sandhu who migrates to work in the brick kilns of Hyderabad every year with his wife. Together, the couple gets an advance of eight thousand rupees when they set out from their village. Last year, they gave their parents five hundred rupees out of this, and also released their mother's jewellery from mortgage from the local moneylender. But the elderly couple miss the daily support of their caring son. On some occasions, prolonged migration frays family bonds. Initially, widow Malti Bariha used to receive money orders



of three hundred rupees every month from her son Charka. But the money has stopped and his visits have become more and more infrequent. She also regrets that her son was not by his bedside when her husband died. Somi, also a Rajasthani widow, says: 'My son has migrated permanently with his wife to Gujarat. He has snapped all ties with his village, which means that he is not forced to remember his ailing mother.'

The intense social devaluation of each of the social groups included in the study expresses itself in diverse ways, each overlaid by specific cultural practices and beliefs, but they all reinforce ultimately the social isolation, loneliness, destitution and hunger of the individuals who live in such difficult circumstances. In all the villages of all the states, we found widows of all castes and communities facing continuous prejudice, and almost none lived in their husband's homes because of physical and psychological abuse and efforts to deprive them of their rights to property. They either returned to their parents' homes or lived alone. It is considered inauspicious to see their faces in the morning, or at any celebration. Their plain and coarse clothes are desexualised and also serve to identify them as inauspicious at all times. Older widows are treated more tolerantly than those whose husbands died when they were young, and those with sons better than the childless. Even more despised are separated women—in a twilight zone because neither respectably married nor widowed—especially those who have themselves left their partners.

Mani was married to a mentally unstable man, but although it was she who had to tend to the family, she felt more socially accepted and protected when he was alive. Somi, also a widow, was wedded to a mentally disabled man, but still she maintains that having a husband is better than not having one, even if one had to do all the work and feed one more mouth. She says that the outlook of the whole society changes when you lose your status in the society as a married woman. There are extraordinary social practices such as being married to an inanimate object, like a knife, to secure symbolic

social acceptance as a married woman. Such was the case with Bhimamma's unmarried sister in Andhra Pradesh.

If single women choose to be self-reliant, they are quickly rumoured to be of 'easy morals.' Bhimanna and her single sister are forced to hear taunts like this when they set out for work each morning: 'Look, both sisters are going out. Where do they go, when will they come back, who they will meet? No one knows. They come back as late as 9 or 10 each night.' Ashiya Begum stepped out to look for work as soon as the customary mourning period after her husband's passing away was over, but her husband's relatives accused her of immorality. Somi bitterly says: 'People see little difference between a widow and a prostitute' (in Hindi, the pejorative terms for both are *raund* and *randi* respectively).

A worse fate for a single woman is to be branded a witch. Marti Kotiya is an elderly widow, but according to the people of Kudiyaagaon village in Rajasthan, she is a *dakan* or witch. The researchers were warned not to visit her as she could cast the evil eye on them, so much so that one of the community researchers refused to accompany the team. Marti, we found, was a frail, old woman, wrinkled and shrivelled, her back almost fully bent. Wearing a torn sari, she welcomed us genially with a toothless smile and asked us to sit, as she fetched water for us to drink. When we asked Marti why the villagers see her as someone 'different,' she just laughed and said: 'Who likes it if a woman does whatever her own mind and heart tells her to do?' She does not expect much from people, but wishes that there was someone who could help her fetch water from the well.

Most old people we spoke to recalled not traumatic interludes of intense deprivation, but looked back at whole lifetimes of battling hunger, with especially low points in their own childhood, when they brought up small children, and now as they aged. Old people seemed to measure their social prestige mainly by the ways they were treated by their grown children, especially sons. Neglectful sons bred for them not just hunger and loneliness, they also brought



upon them shame. They saw this as a product not just of modernity and the crumbling of old family bonds, but also of the pressures of bare survival created by absence of opportunities to earn adequate livelihoods in their villages, and changing patterns of migration where not just the male adult moves away, as in the past, but he now takes with him his wife and children, leaving behind—abandoning—old people to beg or starve. Similar pressures may lead to neglect even as the grown children remain in the village. There is also a social devaluation of age. Researchers were asked by other villagers: 'What is the use of talking to people whose drama of life has passed even the climax scene?'

From a rich Reddy landlord family in Andhra Pradesh, Satyamma is hearing and speech impaired. Her parents paid a rich dowry of gold to a landless family to marry her off at the age of 12, and she was immediately put to hard labour in the fields. Unable to cope, she was returned to her parents. Her brother has taken control of her share of land and never meets her. In her loneliness, she has taken to drinking *sandhi* or locally brewed country liquor. The brother of another disabled girl recalls that on a particular day (probably an eclipse), villagers believed that anyone who saw the face of the girl would die. She was locked in a room the whole day, and not even her own family saw her face. Vali from Dungapur, Rajasthan, is a grey, indigent woman disabled with leprosy and totally dependent on her husband, even to drink water. It has been years since she attended any social function; she says bravely that if she could walk she would have gone and stood in a corner, but in fact she knows no one would want her there for fear of contracting leprosy. Her husband, Haja, has also stopped going anywhere for the same reason. What hurts Vali most is that her own children do not visit her. Many people with disability are hurt by being called by their disability rather than by their names. For disabled women, marriage was always arranged on highly unequal terms, to old men, as labouring second wives, or to men even more disabled than them. Many of these weddings collapse with abandonment.

Udiya Bariha had a lonely childhood. She was never sent to school as she was blind, and she played alone at home. There were some other blind children in the village, but they never met. She felt there was no question of getting married. Both her parents died in quick succession of some fever, and she has lived all alone since then, when she was 15 years old, toiling for 60 long years and only lately begging for her food. No one ever visits her. When we asked her if she was happy, she immediately replied that she was. We then asked her if she has any desires. She is quiet for a long time, then answered haltingly, as though unfamiliar with even her own thoughts: 'It would have been nice to have a good house, clothes, food...'

Oinly Buddi, a widow from Orissa, lives with her children, but still supports herself, cooking and eating separately, even helping her son with money in times of need. Another widow, Musti Rukumma, left her home when she was constantly fed stale food, or offered food in undignified ways, listening to comments about how much she eats. Komapalli Anatamma roared proudly: 'I will not eat one month with this son, next month with another, and yet another month with a third. I refuse to be fed on a rotation basis by my own sons.' Lakshamma lives in the same house as her sons, but they refuse to take care of her. She cries: 'I have to hear the voices of my children every day through the walls. I cannot bear that. I don't ever wish to even see their faces.' But we found many who did not blame their children. 'My children do not themselves have enough to eat. How can you expect them to save and send money back to us?' says one. 'My children have their own family. If they send money to us, how will they eat? After all, we are old now, and have lived out our lives,' says another.

Local communities are typically indifferent, and sometimes even hostile to such destitute persons. Mentally disabled Betkai Tandi is labelled '*badi*' and '*jhaki*,' which mean 'fool' and 'mad' respectively. She asks sadly: 'Do I look like a fool? Am I mad? Tell me, am I? Yet see how the villagers treat me. Their children throw



stones at me when I walk past.' She lives alone with the ghosts and demons that haunt her world.

We encountered no forms of institutional community support for these destitute persons in any of the villages in the three states that we studied. The only exception was the surviving tradition in some villages of collecting *chanda* or voluntary small contributions for organising the weddings of daughters of widows and people with disability. Offering work to the aged or people with disability, or single women, was itself seen as an act of charity, even though the wages were a pittance, and the conditions and length of work highly exploitative.

The social neglect is because of the perceived lack of worth of these individuals who can no longer produce and contribute. 'Did you ever see people on a winter night trying to warm themselves with ash that is already scorched and cold? They will find fires that are still burning.'

### **Hunger, Destitution and Markets**

The engagement with markets of these destitute, profoundly powerless, socially isolated, and devalued individuals, as they try to battle hunger daily and feed their dependents, is always highly unequal and unjust. In this context, one striking finding that emerged from interviews with individuals from each of these highly dispossessed social groups in all three states, was that however infirm they are, however sick, however challenged to feed small children alone or themselves, there is no prospect of food for them unless and until they work. If begging is also considered work, then this is virtually a universal rule that applied to every person we met in the course of our field studies. Even in the supplementary quantitative survey, of the 474 persons interviewed, 340 said they depended mainly on their own work. Those who depend on support from relatives also mostly did unpaid work for them. The employment that these aged, infirm, disabled persons or single women were offered was always arduous and monotonous, itself devalued and

always very low-paid. But even this was offered as a favour, after begging for work, as an act of charity. This was ultimately the story of every day of every life: the stark, merciless daily choice between inexorable, relentless, back-breaking, undignified work and hunger. There was no third choice, of well-earned retirement and rest, of secure care, of adequate social security organised by the State, or by local communities and families.

Marti, an aged woman in Rajasthan, illegally cuts down trees from the scrub forests near her village, and burns these to make coal so that it is not too heavy to carry and sell in the market. She remarks fatalistically, 'Let us see how long I will live. Once my body refuses to move, I will not be able to make coal and then I will starve. As it is, I am down to eating one meal a day'. Many old widows who can barely walk, in all three states, take on the work of grazing cattle on hillsides. Antamma also goes to the forest to gather wood to sell and wild shrubs to eat, but twice in the past month she fainted while in the jungle. They persevere with enormous determination, but a time comes when their bodies give in. Hunger and eventual death is inevitable. Mani took her two small daughters, one barely able to walk, to the forests to gather firewood, and then left them alone at home as she trudged another 17 kilometres to the nearest market. Today she says: 'My body has given up on me.'

Old people need to work regardless of whether they live separately or with their sons; they still need to contribute to the household in productive ways. In finding work, old people have to depend on the local economy since migration as an option is ruled out, physiologically and culturally. The migration of young people does create opportunities for work for aged people in villages, and also for single women and disabled persons, but since employers know they are desperate and powerless, they pay them very low wages, often nothing more than food, country liquor and a new set of clothes once a year. The work they are offered is physically difficult, like cattle-grazing on steep, scrub hillsides with little foliage, weeding, sewing, cutting grass for fodder, cleaning cowsheds, husking



and drying grain, gathering firewood and dung and similar activities that are exacting and toilsome, and the payment exploitative. Even this is always offered like charity to the unproductive and undeserving, rather than as a rightful claim to work. In some cases, old couples living in well-forested regions were not dependent on work from others and instead employed themselves in home-based activities like making brooms and leaf plates, and they gathered food and fuel from the forests. But in the long summer months, it is often too hot for them to walk in the forest during the day, and they cannot see well enough to forage in the forest at night.

Somaiah and his wife, neglected by their grown-up sons, felt they had no option other than working in the fields of landlords. The only work they are given is of weeding. Even the employer is unsure of their capacities and reminds them repeatedly to be careful not to pluck out useful plants. Somaiah admits privately that his eyesight has indeed weakened with age and that there is likelihood of his pulling out the wrong plants. Weeding work is primarily done by women. However, as he is old and deemed incapable of hard labour, he is made to sit among women and do this work. This shames him and bruises his male pride. Men normally are entrusted with more 'important' agricultural roles than weeding and get a wage of 50 rupees per day. However, since Somaiah works with women, he gets a woman's wage of 25 rupees. He keeps lamenting this for a long time, beating his head with his hands. All people with disability in Andhra Pradesh found wage employment—as farm labour, or basket weaving, or selling *sandhi* or country liquor and so on—but disabled men were given what were perceived to 'women's wages' of 25 rupees a day instead of twice that amount the other men earned for the same work. It is mainly those who are severely mentally challenged or mentally ill who find their way to temples and mosques to beg.

Kampalli Antamma, a 70 year old widow, hobbles out of her home each day in search of employment. She seeks wage work in other people's fields. The only work people sometimes give her is of

weeding and cleaning for which she is paid 25 rupees a day. This kind of work does not come her way every day: she is employed for about 10 to 12 days a month in the agricultural season in years of good rainfall. In the lean summer months, there is no work available.

None of our respondents spoke about being driven to casual sex work to earn a living. However, Kamala, in Rajasthan, talks openly of her drift to the dangerous and stigmatised vocation of brewing illegal liquor. She remarks bitterly: 'Who will give work to a widow? Everyone thinks she is searching for a man.' She lost her husband to tuberculosis when she was very young, but she did not have even a day to mourn as she had to feed three small children. She was driven away from her husband's land by his brother, and cleaning cowsheds in the homes of the *patels* brought her little more than stale food. She mortgaged her few belongings, but finally turned to brewing liquor. She collects *mahua* pods from the forest and ferments them for a week, adding many unsavoury ingredients. It is a dangerous vocation, on the wrong side of the law. She has to regularly bribe the police, and rowdy men flock to her hut each night, but the same men ostracise her by day. Although she is redoubtable and fierce, she is still a woman, and rowdy men sometimes pay her less and even break her earthen pots of liquor if she protests.

We found most disabled adults also engaged in hard work which 'able' people were unwilling to do. Dhanu from Orissa and Kava from Rajasthan, both of whom are severely disabled, are fed and given a roof (but no walls) by their brothers in return for the hard, unpaid labour of grazing goats and cattle. Dhanu runs after the goats, and the sores on his legs start bleeding. He cannot even hold an umbrella upright during the rainy season and returns home drenched. When we visited Dhanu, his goats were suffering from some contagious disease. He was tense and anxious about what would become of him in case the goats were to die. His brother would not give him food and he could not hope to do any other work. Kava is older than Dhanu, born with a congenital physical



disability. Both his legs are conjoined and he cannot walk, only crawl. Kava's hands are full of sores because he takes his brothers' sheep to graze in stony, hilly terrain in return for food.

With one leg afflicted by polio, T. Laksmi is a twenty-six-year-old married woman in Andhra Pradesh. A young woman of rare determination, she studied up to high school against her father's strenuous protests by carrying her younger siblings on her back to school as she crawled. She is married to a man who is speech impaired and does no work, and she is the main bread earner of her home. Laksmi works as an agricultural labourer and earns 25 rupees daily, but there is no work available in the off-season, and those are times synonymous with sleeping hungry. Chinnah Buddiah, now sixty, lost both legs in an accident. He weaves baskets at home, but despairs that plastics have stolen the market. Shamim is a 25-year-old woman who was abandoned by her husband when she suffered a stroke in which her left hand became immobilised. Shamim has a five year-old daughter and they both stay with her parents. Even though paralysis has left one hand immobile, Shamim earns by doing embroidery and tailoring. She is not able to get enough work except during festivals. Shankar is badly burnt and lost a hand in a series of accidents. He took employment in a hotel, washing glasses by gripping them between his legs, but the *seth* did not like this and discharged him. Now he too lives by cleaning cowsheds and collecting wood as firewood to sell in the village market. We have already encountered Udiya Bariha, a 70 year old visually impaired woman who, from the age of 15, has lived alone and indomitably supported herself, cleaning cowsheds in return for stale food.

Markets are found to discriminate grossly with these people from the margins not just in work and wages, but also in extending credit. Old people are mostly rudely turned away when they seek food on credit from shopkeepers. Trying to buy groceries on credit is always a humiliating experience for them. Shopkeepers say that there is no guarantee how long old people will live; they may slip

away to the other world without repaying their loans. Komapalli Antamma can never coax credit for food from the *kirana* shop as she is too old to be credit worthy. Therefore, she often just sprinkles salt on boiled rice and gulps it down with water, no *dal*, no vegetables. Between the aged couple Champo and Minzi, there is an agreed



Elderly widows face acute problems



division of responsibilities. Champo is able to beg for food, but finds asking the shopkeeper for a loan even more mortifying, and he leaves it to his wife. Minzi persists patiently and humbly with her wheedling, even when the shopkeeper abuses her. After all, they have nothing except two old plates and one cooking pan to mortgage in times of dire need.

It is even harder for an elderly widow. Somi says: 'When my husband was alive, we never had a problem finding credit, even though he was mentally disabled. A man can get credit from anywhere, he can ask many people. But a woman is turned down more firmly.' They find that shopkeepers charge them more and give them less than their due because they are too weak to protest. Single women report that even formal banks turn them away, as do self-help groups (although the situation is a little better in Andhra Pradesh). A married woman finds it easier to access loans compared to a single woman who earns more than her. If credit is extended by shopkeepers and landlords to those who have no assets to mortgage, it is in lieu of labour on their farms or homes for low wages and long hours, especially for single women. This is indeed the resurgence of a new kind of short-term bonded labour. Earlier, bondage was mainly the burden on men and boys, but single women are now being drawn into this form of disguised bonded labour.

Many people with disability testify that even the thought of going to the *kirana* (grocery) shop stresses them greatly. There is no escape from it as the *kirana* shop not only provides them with many of their daily needs, but also at times is the only source of credit. So they weather visits to the shop in spite of routine abuse. Shankar says the dealer tells him each time to come back the next day. He returns the next day and is told the same thing. He listens and goes home, helpless and empty-handed. 'Sometimes I wish that I was alone, then I would have managed somehow, but with a family it is very different. I can beg, but I would not let them beg for food, for anything,' he says. Indradeep is routinely refused credit from the shopkeeper, even though his son earns as a migrant labourer. T.

Lakshmi refuses to beg for credit at the *kirana* shop, convinced that it is better to live on what one has rather than borrow. She says proudly: 'We eat only what I have'. Her four year-old son often cries from hunger, but Lakshmi tries to pacify him by saving money for 2 or 3 days and getting him a small toffee.

### Government Assistance: Elusive, Meagre yet Deeply Valued

'Write a house for me, Write a Big Card for me.' These are the first words uttered by Berkai Tendi, a destitute and mentally slow woman who lives alone in her village in Orissa, to a team of researchers when they first visit her. By a 'house', she means government assistance to build a free house for homeless people, under the Indira Awas Yojana, and by the Big Card, she means a ration card for BPL (Below Poverty Line) or *Antyodaya* (poorest of the poor) families, which would entitle her to state-subsidised food grain and kerosene. Sujna Nag, a widow says: 'If only I could get a pension or a BPL ration card, I could at least sleep at night. The fear of the next day steals away my sleep.'

The picture that emerges from the study is that for destitute people who live routinely on the edge of hunger, government assistance is difficult to access, ridden by expected problems of corruption and delays. The quantum of assistance is very small compared to their food and survival needs, yet when it is accessed, it is very deeply valued. It affords them autonomy, dignity, rest and security, entirely disproportionate to the scale of assistance.

In our survey of 474 of these destitute people in eight villages in three states, as many as 45 per cent rated government support to be their largest secondary source of food, although for only 19.8 per cent, it was the primary source. 46 per cent of old people reported that they received old age pensions, and 44 per cent of widows benefited from widows' pensions. By contrast, only 9.3 per cent people with disability were covered by disability pensions. 62 per cent men got pensions, as compared to 38 per cent of the women surveyed, suggesting a gender bias by public officials. Separated



single women are not even eligible for widows' pensions. 85 per cent reported now getting more than 200 rupees as pension every month, but 96 per cent affirmed that this was too little to fulfil their food needs. 70 per cent of respondents said they got their pension irregularly, but it came for all the months but 16 per cent did not. 17 per cent collect it from the block or district headquarters, but 46 per cent prefer that it comes through the panchayats, and 18 per cent get it through money orders.

Earlier, Betkai Tendi lived only by begging. But five years ago, the village sarpanch (headman) felt sorry for her and gave her a pension. He is a kind man, we are told. It turns out that his wife is actually the sarpanch, because the panchayat constituency is reserved for women, but her husband performs all her duties. The pension card is Betkai's most precious possession which she deposits for safe-keeping at her nephew's home. She has wrapped it in polythene, and from its folds emerges, as she opens it to proudly show the researchers, a carefully preserved 50 rupee note, which is her savings. She uses her pension to buy 15 kilograms of rice, and vegetables like tomatoes and brinjal as well as oil each month. She saves 5 to 10 rupees monthly, and when it is enough, she buys herself a new saree.

Sankari lost her husband when she was bearing their fourth child. She struggled to raise them, but now that they have grown up and have moved away, it is only her pension of 200 rupees a month that sustains her. She spends all of it buying rice from the open market, but it is not enough for the month. She bought a new saree for herself in the last season when there was an abundant harvest of *mahua* in the forests, which she gathered and sold.

Mani Yadav lives off the 10 kilograms of free grain that she gets under an old age support programme *Annapoorna*, but this is far from sufficient and she still has to search for work. Police Thirumatamma is determined to live up to her resolve not to depend on the charity of her brothers. She survives on the subsidised rice and kerosene oil that she gets with her BPL card. Mali also found

the strength and confidence to refuse her younger son's offer to move in with him because of her widow pension and BPL card. Middle-aged widow Amina Begum has an *Antyodaya* card, and her parents have a BPL card, which makes it much easier for her to feed her family as she does not earn much from her work as a seamstress.

Bhimanna gets 35 kilograms of rice at just 2 rupees a kilo every month, along with three litres of cheap kerosene and two kilograms of sugar. Antamma gets by with her BPL card and pension. Lakshamma and Soniah can eat at least one meal a day for half the month because of their BPL cards. Urmila waits several hours each month at the block office to collect her pension, and spends half of it on broken rice (usually fed to livestock), and the rest on salt and vegetables. She carefully stretches these to last at least three weeks every month.

The small pension amounts afford dignity to the aged and to people with disability who live with and depend upon their relatives. Bijli Boriha gives 180 rupees of her pension every month to her son, and saves 20 rupees for herself. Out of this, she manages to occasionally buy snacks for her granddaughters and nephew's children. Similarly, Brundabati gives most of her pension to her daughter-in-law, and this helps her to overcome the feeling of being a burden. Last month, she was able to buy new clothes for her granddaughter.

The mid-day meal in school is also a source of solace to single mothers. Nirvani unusually sends both her unmarried daughters to work in brick kilns from Bolangir to Andhra Pradesh for several months each year, but is consoled only because her son eats one full meal at class each school day.

There are other novel and unorthodox uses that destitute people are found to make of their cards and pensions. Everywhere they report that these have made them more credit-worthy with *kirana* shopkeepers, who are willing to loan them small amounts of food, feeling more secure that they would be able to repay the



amount the next month. Some shopkeepers mortgage their cards as a surety against their loans. Minzi uses their card to seek loans from the shopkeeper now. She says: 'He is no fool. Now we have a government pension, which is why he gives us credit. If we did not receive pension, the shopkeeper would not even bother to listen to us. He refused to do so in the past.'

But many who are most in need are still turned away by public officials. Sajna was humiliated when she approached officials of the Block Development Office (BDO) for a widows' pension and BPL card. Few disabled adults receive disability pensions. Neither they nor their caregivers have a clear idea about their entitlements and how to apply for them. Dhanu, disabled with leprosy, trekked 25 kilometres to the block office at Khaprakhol to apply for his disability pension. No official was willing to talk to him. He was not allowed to use public transport because of his leprosy, even if he could afford it. So he walked all the way back as well, reaching home well after midnight and sleeping after drinking water. He has lost hope in the worth of applying again.

Nrupati, who died some months after the research, said she had lost all faith in the village leaders and officials. 'They don't even bother to talk to me when I go to them to demand my pension. So why will they give me a card?' she asks. When her husband was alive, they got at least 10 kilograms of rice free of cost each month; now even that has stopped. Aged Marti is denied pension although she has filled the forms many times, because she is not officially listed as poor in the village documents, although it is very evident that she is destitute. Soniah bribed the village officials with *sandhi* (country liquor) and packets of tobacco *bidis* to try and get a form but in vain. Ashiya Begum begged the sarpanch for a pension for years, and finally swallowed her pride and touched the feet of the *patwari* or village revenue official. His father humiliated her, but the *patwari* recalled that Ashiya's husband plied the cycle rickshaw on which he went each day to school, so he wrote her name on the pension list. Kamala had hoped that she would be sanctioned her

widow's pension, with which she would be able to buy subsidised grain with her BPL card. But the pension never came and she was driven to brewing illicit liquor.

The distances at which government institutions are located also acts as a barrier. In Rajasthan, people have to spend bus fares and trek as far as the district headquarters at Dungarpur to collect their pensions. Most aged people and those with disability complain about the distances involved in reaching the health centre and ration shop, and the uncertainty that they would be open when they reached there. In all the three Orissa villages studied, the old and people with disability have to trudge more than seven kilometres both to collect their pensions and their rations. However hard and painful it is for them to walk, they have to check whether grains have arrived at least two or three times every month, and when they finally do get the grains, they have to carry these long distances. Each day spent visiting the ration shop or the office to collect pensions means the loss of earnings or foraging into the forests to collect wild produce for selling. Often, the delayed grain arrives earlier than their pensions, so they do not have the money to buy the grain.

There are illegal restrictions on the amount of grain that they get from the cards. Against an entitlement of 35 kilograms every month, they mostly reported getting four, eight or 16 kilograms on BPL cards. Many are convinced that they are duped or short-changed by the ration shop dealers, but feel powerless to resist. Despite directions from the Supreme Court of India that all aged, disabled and single women should be given *Antyodaya* cards which entitle them to 35 kilograms of rice at two rupees every month, most have at best BPL cards, on which government subsidy is less. Pensions come erratically, often late by three months or more, and people report parting with commissions of 10 per cent to get their pensions. Each rupee is carefully planned for, and the commission literally means that they are robbed of days when they could sleep with a full stomach.



The NREGA (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act), which in principle gives every person who is willing to work, the statutory right to 100 days of guaranteed wage labour at minimum wages per family, is legally open to all the destitute people who shared their stories in this study. But in practice, we found that it remains barred to most. Old people report that they are discouraged to apply for work with remarks such as 'You are too old and will fall sick because of the heavy work involved' The soil that they have to dig is often too hard and unyielding, and, contrary to the scheme, workers are paid based not on the time period worked for but the actual work accomplished. Instead of identifying less physically demanding work for them, like standing guard at the sites, taking care of children, filling stones and soil in baskets, and planting and irrigating saplings, they are given the most back-breaking work, and are therefore themselves eventually compelled to opt out of the work. Disabled Shankar said he wanted very much to work under the NREGS (National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme), but 'my body could just not keep pace'. But blind and partially deaf Rama did find 100 days of work under NREGS, ignoring taunts that he got the work as charity because he was disabled. In Andhra Pradesh, many disabled adults had job cards that entitled them to get work under NREGS, but none reported actually getting employment.

Widows like Padamamma find the work allotted to them under NREGS so hard that she prefers to go for wage labour at less than half the wage in Vikarabad. Amina curses herself for being born a Muslim, as she says she was never trained for wage employment in public works, and is reduced to earning a fraction of it on her sewing machine. Some old widows reported in Dungarpur that they did get work, but only after insisting on it: 'For the sake of work, I go and sit at the work site day after day. I have to compromise my dignity, but what else can I do?' asks some of them. But another insists that asking for work is, after all, unlike begging. Young people of the village resent them, saying that 'these old women and men

cannot work, yet they poach on the rightful chances of others'. Many older widows are turned away openly: 'When I go to ask for work, they say that this is your age to relax, but if I do not work, how will I live?' says one of them.

But many of the younger widows, especially in Rajasthan, welcomed NREGA, saying they have even saved money for the first time to buy grain for the gruelling summer months. One wishes that the scheme gives work the whole year round: 'If the scheme ends, my life would be destroyed.' But those with small children often cannot come to work; one woman says she leaves her children with her neighbour and pays her for this out of her wages. Even the few days of work older women get are precious. They report being able to buy a blanket for winter, or to treat themselves to a sweetmeat they have craved for so long.

The only life insurance enjoyed by the poor is the National Family Benefit Scheme (NFBS), which entitles survivors ten thousand rupees when a breadwinner dies. It eludes most widows we met. The sarpanch took personal pains to ensure that Ramila received her insurance under NFBS within three months of the death of her husband in a construction accident, but such instances are rare. Padamamma, Amina, Kamala and Ashiya are all aware of their entitlements under NFBS. Some struggled for it, some were asked for bribes of as much as half the money, but all despair of ever getting it. Lakshamma's application was arbitrarily rejected because her husband was paralysed before he died, and she lives with her sons, ignoring the fact that they refuse to take care of her.

### Coping With Hunger

Government assistance, however valued, fails to reach many of those who are most in need of it, and for those who do manage to grasp a little of it, it is like sand in the palm of one hand. It is too little and often comes too late to defend people robustly against their daily lives of hunger and want. They survive harsh, protracted want by simply reducing their food intake over prolonged periods of time or



by foraging for food in the forests and eating food that most people would normally shun, by sending even small children out to work, even in conditions of bondage, so that they are fed, by selling their scant belongings, and, always as a last resort, by begging.

Of all ways of coping with hunger, perhaps the most heartbreaking is to wilfully ration their daily intake to levels well below what scientists estimate is absolutely necessary for human survival. They fill their stomachs at night with water or cheap country liquor, rather than food. Old people rationalise this by convincing themselves that they would not be able to digest more food, or that they simply do not need more food, that they can do with little or no food, and ignore the fact that they often work as hard, if not harder, than younger people. They build myths that inferior foods like *puar* actually lengthen life. They also voluntarily often wish to sacrifice for younger persons, believing that their lives are lived and done with, and the young are more deserving of food. For instance, Balmati Boriha in Orissa affirms that she takes only one meal a day, with salt or chilly, as she is now too old and she desires to give her share of food to her grandchildren. Similarly, although Bansī Sabar is not as poor as most others in the study, he says that he does not eat good food as he is now passing through life's last stages and wants to offer his portion to his grandchildren.

Alekh Bariham was witness to the struggles of his mother who died of sickness and hunger while trying to take care of him and his two sisters. Now that he is old, he does not want to burden his family and, therefore, eats only one meal a day. Even a young widow like Padamamma, from Andhra Pradesh, teaches herself to eat less, and only leftovers. She has learnt to always eat only half a meal each time. She recalled eating only thin *sambhar* for lunch, as the rice was eaten by her children. Somi from Rajasthan likewise ate leftovers and sometimes nothing. 'What choice does one have? One has to feed one's children, even if it means denying oneself of food,' she says.

Many deny themselves even in times of relatively less want,

eating frugal meals of rice and water even when there are bags of paddy in the house and chickens pecking in the courtyard which could be eaten. They have seen such hard times that they still want to save for emergencies, investing in livestock and vessels which can be sold and mortgaged, rather than spending on sufficient food, a desperately needed repair of a roof, or medicines or clothes.

A second way of coping with prolonged hunger is to forage for food, often in forests, and to consume culturally inappropriate food that would usually not be eaten. Even in the scrub forests of Rajasthan, they find in summers leaves of wild shrubs like *puar* which they make into *laddoos* with chillies, or roast another wild plant *hama*. We have already described many such wild leaves, roots and tubers which people eat to evade hunger, although often these have no food value, taste very foul and may even be poisonous. These include the poisonous *kaddi* paste, wild fruits *thol* and *kustam*, *gongura*, a poisonous grass *sama*, *kodra*, *kurra* and *batti*. The most dispossessed are also reduced to eating *mailo*, an inferior cereal usually fed only to cattle. Other forms of inferior cereal include *kangni*, *taidal*, *ragulu* and *korabua*. Some trap and eat rats or snails that others shun and despise. In Rajasthan, many spoke of eating maize or *makki* not for rotis, but in a broth as *raabri*, which is not palatable but gives the illusion of a full stomach. In Andhra Pradesh, destitute people often survive hunger with *ganji* and *amballi*. To make *amballi*, a small amount of wheat flour is mixed with a lot of water, adding a pinch of salt and some chilly powder, and cooked for some time. *Ganji* is the starch water drained out of rice after cooking. Either it is solicited from families which cook rice, or a little amount of rice is cooked in a lot of water to add volume to it and to make the stomach feel full.

Many survive by sending out even small children to work. A majority of destitute people are too old, infirm or disabled to migrate or be accepted as bonded workers. Small children are sent for employment even under terrible conditions of bondage, and often only paid wages in food, so that the child may feed itself as it grows.



Kompalli, married when she was nine years old to a man of 30 years, gave all four of her surviving sons as *kutias* or child bonded workers as soon as each turned 10, in return for which they were fed, clothed and paid hundred rupees a year. She saved most of this to spend later on their weddings. Rama, a visually challenged man labours himself as well as sends out his young daughter to work. The first day she returned from work, he wept bitterly: 'Is this her age to be burdened with work?'

Formal child bondage is not as common in Rajasthan as it is in Orissa and rural Andhra Pradesh. Somi sends her young son to work as a domestic servant at the house of a teacher and takes her daughter with her to collect wood. The son worked in the teacher's house for six years Somi says: 'There, he used to get food two times a day and two sets of clothes in a year. I would not have been able to give him these'.

Since most people are denied even the most petty credit from shopkeepers for their daily needs, they sell and mortgage whatever little they own. They sell their patches of land, if at all they retain control over them, brass, bronze or copper utensils, jewellery and livestock. Nrupati had begun to sell her utensils and jewellery even when her husband, who worked as a *halia* or bonded labourer, was alive. His health declined when he took to alcohol. After his death, she was compelled to sell all she had and lived mainly by begging. The peremptory demands of hunger sometimes compel people to haplessly sell even their only source of food for the future. A disabled man in Rajasthan said to us: 'There is just three kilograms of maize left in my home and four mouths to feed. I am thinking of selling my remaining two goats'.

The last resort is to beg for food or small quantities of cash, but of the 474 destitute persons surveyed, only 14 or less than four per cent said they depended primarily on begging. Many felt that begging is like extinguishing a part of themselves, Nrupati, reduced to begging in her last days, said, 'It would be better if I died', which she did a few months later. Particularly when she was sick, she was

totally at the mercy of others and ate only whatever they gave her. 'My neighbours take pity on me and give me something to eat. If they didn't, I would die. They give me some tea and rice or something to eat. I consume that and live'. When the weather was fine and she was not ailing, she tried to make it up and salvage some of her dignity by watering her neighbour's vegetable patch.

Some beg during emergencies, as did Tanudeep's wife when he fell critically sick. She collected 200 rupees to pay to the private quack. Many old people confide that they often resort to passive, subtle forms of begging, such as visiting relatives who are better off, during meal times, or simply sitting for long hours outside the homes of those who are more privileged. Some sit in the school when the mid-day meal is served to students, and they are permitted to eat the leftovers. Incidentally, the Tamil Nadu government has long permitted all old people and widows to share the school mid-day meal. A similar directive by other state governments would go a long way to enable destitute, old people to survive with some dignity.

Sankari begged for food for two years after her husband's death as long as her children were very small. They also went into the village begging for food, and even brought back some leftovers for their mother. Blind Udiya Bariha, now 70, began to beg only when she became very old and sick, although she fended for herself through work ever since she was 15. Champo begs when he must, but he is too ashamed to beg in his village. Instead, he painfully walks several kilometres to neighbouring villages to beg. Begging saps people's self-esteem. Somaiah, an old man in Vikarabad, Andhra Pradesh, said defiantly: 'I have begged and got this [a coat], so what's the shame in it? I begged, so I did beg! Simple!'

## Conclusion

Minzi managed to laugh and joke with us, even as she spoke of their daily struggle for food, cleaning cowsheds, and begging for leftovers and rice water. At the end of a morning with her, as we were parting, she broke off a ripe pumpkin she had grown on the



roof of her hut and pressed it in my hands, urging me to accept it as a gift to a guest who had come to see her from so far away.

All of us who were associated with this study were overwhelmed by the enormity of human deprivation—unrelenting and extreme, pushing people for long periods to the borders of survival itself—which so many vulnerable and destitute people live with routinely, as a way of life. Yet the picture that emerges from our study is still remarkably illuminated with glimmerings of hope. We found that the state had indeed penetrated to reach forgotten people in remote locations. State support was expectedly meagre, uncertain, ridden by delays and corruption, but that was not the full story. It had reached some of those who are most powerless, and where it had, it was deeply valued and made the crucial difference in their lives between a life with dignity and death or hopeless want. The grim stories of their lives were also lit by their courage and resilience, but also their humour and humanity in situations where these were most tested. Despite daily odds and frequent neglect by those with whom they had shared their lives, and by their neighbours, very few whom we met in this study gave up. Because we offered a shoulder, many did weep, but not for long. Most quietly, stoically, soldiered on in many painful ways, with that most difficult battle of all—the battle just to live—and that too, with their dignity and self-worth bravely intact.

## SELECTED LIFE HISTORIES





## RAJASTHAN

### *I. Marti*

For Marti, her name conveys what life has been for her. Marti is a feminine derivative of 'dead'. Marti says that it is true: after all she is the 'living dead'. Marti is an old widow, but according to people of Kudiyagaon, she is also a *dakan* (witch). Her identity of being an old woman, a mother and a widow is preceded by her 'other' identity that of a *dakan*—the village witch. The identity of being a *dakan* is so overpowering that the first thing that we came to know about Marti was not that she lives in an impoverished state and is an old widow without caregivers, but that she is an evil person with bad eyes and that her curse is potent (though Marti in the beginning did not utter a word about it).

The overt stigmatisation of Marti was so evident that while we were going to meet her, some villagers warned us about her power to cast the evil eye on anyone who comes near her and that we should not go anywhere near her. In fact, one of the women from our research team who belonged to the same village refused to accompany us because she did not want to go near the 'village witch'.

The concept of *dakan* has been used from a long time to oppress women. In most cases, *dakans* are those women who are vocal and often go against social norms and are thus perceived as a threat to the dominant cultural and social order. The process of branding a woman *dakan* in most of the cases is initiated at the behest of her immediate relatives as once a woman is declared a witch, her claims on property are lost.



When we met Marti for the first time, we were all very surprised. What we saw in front of us was a frail, old woman, all wrinkled and shrivelled up, her back almost bent, wearing a torn sari. She gave us a toothless smile and asked us to sit. We tried to look for signs of why she was marked out, and the only sign we could find was her red eyes, probably due to incessant crying or cataract.

Marti was not born a *dakan*. The metamorphosis started many years after her marriage. Before marriage, she was like any other child in the village, albeit a poor child. In spite of the poverty and hunger that defined her life, Marti remembered her childhood fondly. There was no bitterness on her face when she talked about the poor, old times, as probably those were the times when the only worry was hunger.

Marti tells us she started working very early in life as in those times everyone worked. There existed a kind of equality in the village: equality of everyone being poor and hungry. The same was the condition of Marti's natal home. Nobody earned enough to feed all mouths in the house, but ironically, in spite of impoverishment, food was not that big a problem. 'The forest was accessible and it belonged to us so whenever there was nothing to eat, all of us would go in the forest and eat fruits like *ber*, *billi* and *chilbil*,' she says. There were times Marti remembers when she did not see grains for days at a stretch, but they all survived for they knew that the forest would be there to protect them from hunger, as it had always done. After all, her grandparents had survived the worst drought just because of the forest. Bhils have traditionally been forest people and the forest provided them sustenance in the form of fruits like *mahua*, *tendu*, *ber* and timber products. It has also been a major means of livelihood. The establishment of government control and that of the Forest Department over the forests constituted a major blow to the Bhils.

When Marti was 14 and had attained puberty, she was married for a good bride price. She herself admits that she was not bad-

looking and could work a lot, two qualities that are required from a good wife. For Marti's father, marrying her off meant losing an economic asset. But again, daughters have to be married and so Marti was married off to Monga, a man in Kudiyagaon village, with a little piece of infertile land in his name. Nothing much grew on the land. Moreover, Marti was able-bodied and she knew that together they would work and survive.

Marti and Monga started their new life with hardships. First, a new *raupri* (hut) had to be constructed which required money and a lot of labour. Through hard work and borrowing some money, the hut was made. Marti and Monga then started looking for work. They survived on whatever work they got, as the produce from the land was only enough for a month or two. Mostly, Marti and Monga used to collect wood from the forest and sell it in the city. After selling the wood, they used to buy *mailo*, a very inferior quality grain given to cattle, and make *chapattis* from it. When they could not earn enough from collecting wood, they used to eat *phar* (leaves of wild shrub).

As time passed, Marti gave birth to four children (two sons and two daughters). When the children were young, the whole family made it a habit to survive on *mailo* and *jowari*. Now it was not only two of them, there were more mouths to feed without more workable hands. Marti told us that eating *mailo* was not healthy as it led to constipation, and their stomachs would hurt so much that they could not even get out of bed. At such times, the whole family used to drink lot of water so that their stomachs got cleared. Despite knowing that *jowari* and *mailo* were bad for health, Marti still gave them to everyone. After all, something had to be eaten. For 14-15 years, *mailo* was their staple diet. Marti said that she and her husband did not feel bad about eating it as they had such food all their lives, but what upset them was their children eating it and complaining that their stomach hurt while trying to urinate or defecate.

At the time when her children were growing up, Marti's



reputation as a witch also started growing. It all started as a very trivial issue. Marti had given fodder to her neighbour's goats. After a few days, all the goats died. It was the first incident, a small one that would have been forgotten, had the neighbour not been convinced that it was she who had cast an evil eye. The real reason was a land dispute between Marti and her neighbour, who went and told the whole village about the evil eye story. Marti, who till now was earning a meagre income by working as a labourer in the field, was avoided because of her 'evil eye'.

Still, Marti worked as a daily labourer whenever she could get work. Life was difficult but, with time, the villagers started forgetting about her being a witch. After all, it had been three years since the goats had died and nothing untoward had happened or had been done by Marti since then. She was once again being invited for weddings and other social occasions. But then one day Marti went to fetch water from the well. It was a well that she did not visit often, but the well near her house had nearly dried up in the summer, so there was no option. Marti did not talk about this episode, but fetching water from the other well turned out to be disastrous for her.

After one day, the water in the well turned foul and Marti was blamed for it. The spell that had taken three years to fade was back. Marti again became the one with evil eye. This got aggravated when she went to visit her nephew who was very sick and died three days after she visited him. What amazed us the most was that everybody knew that her nephew was going to die, there was no way he would have escaped his death, but still the blame fell on her.

Around the same time, there was talk in the village that the government was going to build a reservoir to make the village lush and green. However, the village never became lush and green; instead it led to dispossession of land for her and the villagers. Marti, like others in her village, lost the little bit of land that she had. In place of it, they were given land on a mountain slope where nothing grew.

Left with no option, Marti's two sons and her husband went to work in Gujarat. Soon the sons were able to earn enough to give bride price and they got married. The daughters were also married at a young age. Marti's husband Monga also knew that his wife was being slowly branded *dakan*. He was also bearing the brunt of being taunted and asked: 'What is your wife is going to do next?' On many occasions, the villagers told him to abandon her and marry again as he was just 45 years of age.

Once Marti's sons and daughters were married, she thought her life would be easier as there would be only two mouths to feed. She thought Monga could work in the fields and she could collect wood. However, no work came their way because of her 'evil eye.' Marti's expectations for a better life did not get fulfilled. One of her sons migrated to Gujarat with his wife, while the other son and his wife, who stayed back, were too poor to support them. Days and nights of hunger coupled with social exclusion were back for Marti and Monga.

Monga, who till then had not blamed Marti, started doubting her. It was more to do with the disillusionment and being called '*dakan ka pati*' (husband of a witch) that made him bitter. The result was that Monga stopped going to work: he simply sat in the house the whole day. Marti now was too old, but still struggled to keep herself and her husband from starving. The only option left was to go to the forest at nights and fetch wood. Marti started going to the forest in the dark nights, with an axe in her hand, when the moon was not visible. She used to cut wood all night and hide it in the forest. The next morning, she used to go again and get the wood in small bundles hidden inside grass. Once the wood was safely in the house, Marti then burnt it to turn it into coal. She said: 'I could not carry wood to the city, as it is very heavy. Coal is much lighter to carry and sell in the market.'

For Marti, going to the forests in the night was a question of livelihood and getting two decent meals. But the villagers construed the whole issue in an entirely different manner which went on to



reinforce Marti's image as a witch. Marti, in their stories, was depicted as a woman who had killed goats, made the well go dry and killed her nephew. What would she be doing in the forests on dark nights except black magic?

When we asked Marti why the villagers saw her as someone 'different,' she just laughed and told us something that sounded true for women all over the world, '*Kisko aisi aurat pasand hai jo apne mann se kaam karti hai?*' (Who likes a woman does whatever she wants?). Marti did not pay much attention to what people said, as hunger was her main concern. Old and weak, Marti kept on selling coal. Her husband also gradually started working. Marti said that probably that was one of the best times for her: both her husband and she were earning, and her son who was in Gujarat used to send money, even if irregularly. She told us pointedly that at that time, they had two pairs of new clothes and there was always grain in stock for one month.

One day, Marti got the news that her son and daughter-in-law, who was expecting a baby, were coming from Gujarat. Monga and Marti were overjoyed. It was going to be their first grandchild. The daughter-in-law was too weak when she arrived and needed a lot of care. Marti sold her *kandla* so that her *bahu* (daughter-in-law) got nutritious food, milk and fruits. But in spite of the care, the daughter-in-law developed an infection and died.

Marti says that her daughter-in-law's death broke her. She had not even cried that much when her own daughters got married and left her house. Engulfed in her own sorrow, Marti did not know that this death was also being credited to her and this time not only by the villagers, but also by her own relatives. The situation was so bad that Marti could not even go out of her house as people had started telling her not to come near their houses. If a house had a new daughter-in-law or a child was born, Marti was told categorically not to show her 'inauspicious face'. Marti's husband passed away a year ago of tuberculosis and again it was attributed to Marti.

Marti is beyond all taunts and exclusionary practices. A tough woman from the beginning, she does not want to have any relations with the villagers. She says: 'Why should I talk to them? No one needs me and I do not need them.' However, what upset her most is that her own people started doubting her: her husband, her sons, and her second daughter-in-law. At present, Marti's status is that of a *dakan* as well as a *raadi* (widow). Her sons do not help her: and she does not expect much, except that somebody should fetch water for her from the well.

Marti tells us quite openly that most days she is able to eat one meal. When the times are really bad, even though she is unwanted, Marti goes to her relatives' and daughters' houses to ask for food. Towards the end of the interview, Marti said: 'Let's see how long I live: once my body stops moving, I will not be able to make coal, and then I will starve.'

## 2. Ramila

Until a year ago, Ramila was a married woman with five children. Her family comprised her husband, three sons, two of whom were attending school, and two daughters, of whom one was married. However, in a short span of one year, Ramila lost her husband, and became poor. Things were never easy and good for Ramila, but not so bad either. With one daughter married, two sons in school and one small son to look after, and her husband working in Gujarat, money was thin, but not absent from the house.

There were times when Ramila and her husband thought they would die in poverty like their forefathers. Dhanji, her husband, was working in the city just to ensure that they did not end up like others and, to that end, he had opened a bank account in which they put two hundred rupees every month without fail.

Ramila and Dhanji were the products of long-drawn poverty and hunger. As children, both Ramila and Dhanji used to graze cattle in the day, and, in the afternoon, eat whatever they could find in the forest. A prominent childhood memory in Ramila's mind



is that as a child, she did not have clothes. She owned just one piece of cloth which she wrapped around herself. Ramila said even during those times when everybody was poor, it was embarrassing for her to wrap a little piece of cloth around her body. But she also knew that her mother was a widow and could not afford much. Dhanji's life also followed the same pattern, the only difference being that he did not own any clothes save for an underwear. While Ramila had a mother, Dhanji had no parents. He was brought up by his brothers, though not as their blood but like an unpaid servant. He only got two meals a day and one piece of clothing for the whole year.

When Ramila first heard about her marriage to Dhanji, she was happy as by that time Dhanji had started working in Gujarat. She thought she was getting married to a man who worked in the city and wore pants and shirts. Ramila and Dhanji were married without much fanfare in a ceremony to which the whole village contributed. Soon after the marriage, Dhanji went back to Gujarat for work. He knew that he could not stay for long in the village as working was more important now that he had a wife to look after. By the time Dhanji returned from Gujarat, Ramila was pregnant with their first child.

Soon a pattern was established in their lives. Like most other able-bodied men in the village, Dhanji used to migrate in summers and in winters stayed back in the village to cultivate the little piece of land which they owned. If the drought spared the land, and the yield was good, there was food for two to three months. Migration to Gujarat has been a long tradition in Dungarpur due to lack of employment opportunities and infertile land. Most men and some women migrated on a seasonal basis to Gujarat, and Dhanji was no different.

Ramila and Dhanji were content that their childhood was not being replicated in the lives of their children. The children went to school, got food twice a day, and had two pairs of clothes: something that Ramila and Dhanji never got. It was soon time to

get their elder daughter married. She had reached the age of 14, and if not married soon, her prospects of getting a good groom would diminish. Dhanji had saved enough money to get her elder daughter married. Though it was a simple wedding, at least he did not have to ask for *chanda* (contribution) from the villagers.

Ramila thought that with one daughter married and her sons in schools, there was only one daughter to marry off and that was still a long time away. One day, the villagers came back with the news that her husband had died while digging a well in Gujarat. Ramila was not able to see her husband's body; his younger brother cremated him in Gujarat. For a few days, Ramila was not able to believe that she had lost her husband. She believed that Dhanji would eventually come back.

Too much was at stake for her and that was one of the main reasons that it was difficult for her to believe that Dhanji was no more. There was not much in the house, since the village was hit badly by floods the previous year. There was no yield; whatever they had sowed was washed away. After marrying her daughter off, there was no money left. Before going to Gujarat, Dhanji had borrowed some money to buy grains and he also needed some money to go to Gujarat. Dhanji had also sold Ramila's jewellery for 700 rupees. The leftover grains lasted for a few days, but once the last rites had been performed, which meant feeding the whole village, nothing was left. Though the villagers helped with grains for a few days, Ramila knew that she would have to start working soon.

Ramila's only consolation was that she had a piece of land which she thought she might sell or cultivate. But as fate would have it, her elder brother-in-law took it on the pretext that she would not be able to cultivate it on her own and that it would become barren. Ramila went to her mother's house. Though her mother managed to give her 20 kilograms of inferior grain that she has stored from her BPL quota, Ramila was not offered a permanent place to stay. With small children, it was difficult for Ramila to work, but whenever she got the opportunity, she undertook manual



labour. Food remained the most pressing issue given that it was not only herself that she had to feed but also four children. Though sometimes the children used to get one meal in school, there was not enough to feed them properly in the night.

It was difficult for her to send all her children to school now, and after much deliberation, Ramila took her elder daughter out of school, as it would not only save expenses but she could also help her in collecting wood from the nearby forest and making *kanda* from cowdung so that more money could be earned by selling it in the market. Making *kanda* meant looking for cowdung all the time, as Ramila did not have her own cattle. So, for half the day, Ramila and her daughter kept searching for cowdung. At times, collecting cowdung led to skirmishes, and at such times Ramila cried and told us that even collecting the waste of cows led to fights, but she still had to search for it.

Despite the hardship and intense labour, it was difficult to keep the hearth burning, but this was not Ramila's central concern. Her main worry was to return the money that she had earlier borrowed. Now that her husband was not alive, people had started asking for their money back. In between sobs, Ramila said: 'I would have returned the money somehow, but it was so cruel to ask for it immediately after his death. Where will I get it from?' Hounded by moneylenders, Ramila knew that the time had come when her eldest son, aged nine, had to become the 'man' of the house and start earning. Moreover, sending him to school was becoming unaffordable. Ramila's eldest son now works in Gujarat as a cotton picker. Often, she cries at night when she thinks about her son and worries about what he eats, how he manages on his own.

In the end, Ramila says: '*Mard chala gaya, man maar liyaa, par jo jeth ne kiya woh kaise maanu?*' (My husband died, I accepted it; but how do I accept the behaviour of my elder brother-in-law?). She feels betrayed by him. Not only is the land not hers now, but also the money that the sarpanch got her from the NFBS (Rs. 10,000) has been taken by him, allegedly for safe-keeping. At

present, Ramila works under the NREGS, but her main worry is what will happen after 100 days.

### 3. Rama

The first time we met Rama, he was apprehensive about talking to us. He told us point blank: 'Everybody knows that I am poor and what is there in a poor man's life to know about, except that I am also partially deaf and blind?' On a little prodding, Rama said that he was 'leading a good life,' yet his home and his clothes told a different story, one woven around poverty, disability, exclusion and hunger. We next met Rama by chance, in one of his weaker moments. This time he was in a meditative mood and the first sentence that he uttered was: 'There is just 3 kilograms of *makai* left in my house and there are four mouths to be fed. Maybe I should sell my two goats.'

Rama was not born with visual and hearing impairments. It was a spate of misfortunes that made him partially deaf and blind. Rama's parents had passed away early in life, leaving him and his three brothers orphaned. He has no memory of his parents, but he says that they were not very poor and had a small piece of land, which was later taken away by his paternal uncles. When his father died, his brothers were barely teenagers and were saddled with the responsibility of taking care of five-year-old Rama. The brothers brought up Rama as best as they could, but it was a life of utter impoverishment. The brothers were barely able to manage food to sustain themselves, but they tried their best to feed Rama.

School was out of question, and Rama says that at that time, only rich children attended school. About food, Rama says that though it was not lavish, most times there was food in his stomach. He remembers distinctly that one meal everyday consisted of *puar laddoos* (inferior food made by dry leaves of shrub) and the other meal was that of *roti* and chillies.

Till the age of 10, life for Rama went on a set pattern, one meal of *puar*, *kodra* or *mailo* and, if lucky, the next meal of *makai*



roti, but interspersed were days without food, days of gnawing hunger. This was also the age when, for the first time, Rama was initiated into working as a child labourer. The money was very little, but he had food for two meals a day.

Rama fell ill though he has no recollection of his ailment. The impact of the disease was that he gradually started going deaf in one ear. Since there was no money in the house, going to a proper doctor was out of the question, and, therefore, Rama's brothers tried traditional remedies to treat him. When there was no improvement, he was taken to the hospital but by that time the harm was done. Still, Rama did not lose hope and kept on working.

One day Rama heard that some people from his village were going to Gujarat to work in a mill. He felt that if he went with them, he would have better opportunities to earn some real money, and so he went with them. In the mill, Rama used to work for 14 hours—as much as any grown up man did—but the wages that he was given were half of an adult male's. Still, this was the first time Rama had seen money. The sheer touch of money made him feel happy and powerful. His only thought was that finally the days of impoverishment and hunger were over. Rama was paid for the first month, but when he went to ask the *thekedar* (contractor) for his pending salary of one month, what he got in return was the loss of his job.

Without a job, Rama came back to his village. His faith in the city was shaken and he decided never to go back. Rama grazed cattle and took up any work that was offered to him back in his village. Soon he realised that food and casual work were not enough. After all, one day, like his brothers, he had to get married and bring a bride home, for which he needed to pay a bride price. Also, he thought that since he was grown up, he should return a little bit of what his brothers had done for him.

The thought that being penniless, he would not be able to get married kept haunting him. Being partially deaf was also a problem. By this time, all his brothers had settled. Rama was also getting

older; most boys his age in the village were already married. Again, Rama was left with no choice but to go to Gujarat. This time Rama went with the firm determination to save money. Saving money meant eating one time a day, and sometimes his food comprised only roasted *mahua* flowers and pods. At times, Rama went without food. He only had a cup of tea so that the maximum amount of money could be saved.

Three months of hard work and irregular meals fulfilled Rama's dream of marriage. At the age of 20, he got married to Vali, a woman who was not beautiful but was 'hardy as a buffalo,' who could work all day without complaining.

With the money that was left, Rama made a hut for himself and Vali, as he now could not sleep in his brother's courtyard. In the initial years, life was smooth for Rama and Vali; Rama had a hut, a wife and also some cattle (given to him by his brother when he made a separate hut for himself). Rama also had a daughter. However, Rama slowly started losing his eyesight and was diagnosed with tuberculosis. Though medicines were free, the cost of travelling to Dungarpur (the nearest city) was too much for him to bear. Rama did not want money to be spent on the medicines but Vali was determined that the treatment should go on. Like in the life of any poor person, selling assets seemed to be the only way. First went the oxen, then his wife's jewellery, and in the end went the goats.

The medication went on for three years, and with it started days of hunger and utter impoverishment. Vali started to do casual labour in the fields to sustain the family. These are the three years that Rama remembers by what was sold in which month and how many days his wife did not eat. Eventually, he was cured of tuberculosis but his eyesight could not be restored. He was now both blind and deaf.

Rama had to start working again, and this time Vali also came and started working with him. Every day, both of them would go in search of work and they took whatever work was offered to them. The hearth was kept burning, though with great difficulty. In such



critical times, Vali gave birth to a daughter and one more son. Having a son was a joyous occasion for both of them, but sons are not like daughters; they have to be sent to school.

So now there were three children in the house and five mouths to be fed. Also, work was becoming scarce. Rama says: 'When there are so many able-bodied people to choose from, why would anybody choose me?' For Vali, getting work was comparatively easy but she also had a newborn child to look after. Hunger was again becoming a way of life and Vali was tired of telling the children that they would get proper food the next day. With no option left, Rama sent his elder daughter to work. The first day when his daughter returned from work, Rama cried bitterly, saying this was neither her age to work nor be burdened by the duties of the house.

Gradually the situation improved, and there was food in the house. But then Rama's younger son got jaundice. More money was needed so Vali started working again, leaving the newborn child in the care of her younger daughter. Rama remembers those days and says that the situation was so bad that they did not even have the money to buy ration from the ration shop.

Rama's elder daughter had also reached a marriageable age; she was 14 and had to be married soon. The immediate problem, however, was from where to get the money for it. He knew that he could rely on his community for rice and wheat, but he did not know from where to get money for other expenses. Seeing no other option, Rama asked the villagers to donate money for his daughter's marriage. It has been seven years since his daughter got married, and Rama still does not get work. He was given work under NREGS but the others started saying: '*Rama andha hone ka faayda pa raha hai*' (Rama's getting work because he is blind).

#### 4. Mani

'As long as I remember, I've been poor and alone.' These were the words with which Mani started to tell us about her life. One look at

Mani told us she had led an extremely difficult life. Her struggle with poverty and life had numbed her emotions so much that she talked about her own life as though it were that of a stranger's.

Mani told us she was given in marriage by her father to a mentally disabled man. She had not wanted to get married to him. When she told her father this, he dismissed the groom's condition as a mere bout of madness. The real reason, however, was different. According to Mani, her father was too poor to find an able groom for her. Also, he thought that marrying her off to a mentally unstable person was better than keeping her at home and feeding one more mouth.

After marriage, life became more difficult, as she not only had to take care of herself but also a mentally challenged husband. She naively believed that her husband would be cured if someone got him rid of the evil spirits that possessed him. When she started interacting with her husband's brothers and their wives, it seemed that they wanted her husband to remain mentally challenged as otherwise the family land would have to be divided again. Mani also noticed that her husband's brothers did not let go of any opportunity to insult her husband. To get rid of the evil spirit in her husband, Mani tried to get him cured through the local *ojha*. Gradually, the husband, to whom she did not want to get married to and disliked, was now her responsibility, and Mani had started caring for him. While talking about her husband, Mani told us: 'It is easy to take insult when it is directed towards you, but not when it is directed towards your husband, who, because of his disability, cannot answer back and keeps smiling.'

In the Bhil community, a newly married man and his wife stay in a new hut, but Mani and her husband lived with the whole family. For Mani, each day started with taunts: 'This mad man cannot work and now he had got a wife who is also a burden for us.' Mani felt humiliated and cried, but never answered back. At times, Mani noticed that two kinds of food were prepared in the house, one for the family and the other for her and her husband. Their meal



consisted of *jowari roti* and chillies. Later, she was given one sack of *jowari* and told to cook for herself and her husband. She still did not complain.

One day, however, things went out of control, when all the three brothers came together and beat up her husband, accusing him of stealing their money. That day Mani decided to make a hut for herself and her husband and stay separately. Once they moved out of her brother-in-law's house, her husband gradually started getting 'normal' (that is why Mani firmly believes that the brothers had cast a spell on him). He started taking cattle for grazing, and collecting wood. Mani also started working as a casual labourer.

Mani gave birth to two daughters. After the birth of her second daughter, her husband's mental condition started deteriorating. After a prolonged illness, interspersed with bouts of mental instability, her husband died. Soon after, her brother-in-law threatened to kill her if she did not leave the house. One day, they came to her hut and threw away all her belongings. In the dead of the night, fearing for her daughters' lives and her own, she ran away to her maternal village. Once there, Mani's brother, though not very welcoming, accepted her and gave her a little piece of land on which she made a hut for herself. With two daughters aged two and three, life was bound to be difficult. There was no financial support. Her brother was too poor to support her in any manner.

As a temporary arrangement, Mani sold whatever jewellery she had, but she knew it would not last long. Ultimately, she had to find some way of supporting herself and her two daughters. She started collecting wood from the nearby forest and selling it in the market. If she had some spare time, she made brooms from *khajur* leaves. For Mani, it was the hardest time of her life: taking her two small daughters, one barely able to walk, to the forest to collect wood. The main hurdle was selling it in the market, for which she had to traverse a distance of seventeen kilometres on foot. It also meant that she had to get up at four am and walk all the way to

Dungarpur. Since the distance had to be covered on foot, Mani had to leave her daughters alone in the house.

Until this point, Mani was telling her story as a mere spectator. She broke down and said: 'You cannot even imagine what I went through.' After regaining composure, she continued in the same tone: 'When I used to come back in the evenings, sometimes I could hear my younger daughter wailing from afar because of hunger, but my elder daughter used to wait patiently with an empty stomach.' If the sale of wood was good (especially in winters), Mani used to buy wheat and *makai*, though not for making rotis but *raabri*, a broth of *makai* flour and water, in which less *makai* is consumed but it gives the feeling of fullness. Sometimes she also made rotis and all three of them ate it with chillies: a food that was considered a feast by them. Rice was unreachable for them, so it was only during communal and social gatherings that her daughters got to eat it. However, in bad times, especially for summers, Mani used to collect *puar* (leaves of a wild shrub that are eaten in times of scarcity) and make *laddoos* to be eaten with chillies. Sometimes they even had to do with *hama* (a kind of wild shrub) that had to be roasted and eaten. On occasion, when there was no food in the house, her brothers used to give her some *makai*. Mani had only been telling us what her daughters ate. When we coaxed her to tell us what she ate, she merely laughed and told us that she ate whatever was left, which sometimes meant nothing. 'I have lost count of how many days I went without food,' she said.

Times were difficult but gradually they passed. Her daughters were old enough to help her and they also used to collect wood as well as make brooms. Seeing her daughters grown up was, on one hand, a respite for her, but, on the other, it was also a reminder that they needed to get married soon. With sheer will and determination, she got both her daughters married. Her only condition was that her sons-in-law should be of sound mind. Mani had done her bit, but in the process there is no money left with her and she is also burdened by the debt that she incurred during the marriages. Her



only consolation is that she only has to care about herself, which means she can stay hungry and live with a single piece of clothing.

It has been forty years since Mani has been staying in her maternal home. We asked whether her daughters help her, to which Mani said: 'I initially thought that they would help me in my old age. But when I was not able to help my mother, how can they?' Mani then told us that both her daughters are very poor and she has even kept her elder daughter's son with her because she is not able to feed many mouths.

She still keeps looking for work so that she can eat one meal a day. Most times, she has to beg for work but she says in a matter-of-fact tone: '*Kya kare? Ijjat to kharab hoti par pet ke liye karna padta hai*' (What to do? I lose my honour in the process, but I have to eat). Her only consolation is that she gets an old age pension and 10 kilograms of free grain from the Rajasthan government. When no food is available in the house, Mani drinks black tea and boiled water so that she feels that her stomach is full.

### 5. Punja and Puja

'A person ages when he gets broken, not by how many summers and winters he has seen'. Punja and Puja are above sixty years of age. Their faces are marked by wrinkles, and their feet badly torn by the hard work they've done all their lives.

Punja asked us to sit beneath a tamarind tree while he went to call Puja. Without any apologies, Punja told us that the hut was too small and too full of things, so there was no place to sit inside. He then told us that even he and his wife only use it in winters, and for that they had to take out half their belongings. We were intrigued to know what the belongings were. A glance inside their hut showed us nothing but some vessels for making food, an old, weather-beaten *shahu* (blanket) and a rope line on which two pieces of clothing were hanging.

The earliest memories that Punja has are of going to school, a rarity in those times as only the children of rich people went to

school. Punja's mother was born in poverty and wanted her children to study and do well in life. The children (all six of them) were aware of the importance of education and also the privilege of being the first in their *fala* (the Bhil hamlet) to go to school. Punja told us that in those times, there were very few schools and he and his younger brothers had to walk a long way to reach school. They were aware how hard their mother was working to be able to send them to school.

While Punja was studying in class six, his mother fell down from a tree and suffered multiple fractures in her legs. Though the injury was not very serious, she mother could not walk for twelve months. With his father already dead and his mother injured, there was no one to take care of the younger siblings and earn money to feed everyone. Punja's family also had no land. So the forest was the only means of survival for them. For few days, Punja collected whatever he could from the forest, but it was not enough to feed the whole family. Also, money was needed so that his mother could be treated. With no alternative left, Punja left school and went to Ratanpur (a small town nearby) to work as a labourer. He used to get Rs. 10 daily for digging a well, a tough job for a young child. In the evening, he used to come back and go to the forest with his two brothers to collect wood and some eatables.

When there was no work available, the only source of income was collecting wood and then walking all the way to the nearest town in the night to sell it. After selling the wood, he could barely afford to buy one kilogram of *makai*. Punja still remembers he was always in a hurry to return home with the *makai* as he knew everybody at home would be hungry. When there was no food available, they had to rely on *puar*, *hama*, *kodra* and *kutti* (different varieties of wild shrub) for food. During such times, *raabri* was the only food item that was available to them. Punja says: 'It was such a hard time for me that I was even scared of falling sick!'

Eventually, Punja's brothers grew up and his mother was well enough to share the burden of work. Soon Punja got married to



Puja, who was from a slightly better-off family. Once they were married, Punja thought life would not be very difficult as the two of them would work and earn money. He wanted to make sure his children would not suffer his fate. Immediately after their marriage, it was decided that Punja should have his own hut and take care of his family. The more Punja tried to get work, the more difficult it became for him to get it. The only alternative was to continue collecting wood from the forest.

Historically, the Bhils had stayed in the forests and almost treated them as their own property. However, after independence, the forests were declared as reserved property and villagers were particularly barred from entering it. Punja, for whom the forests were an integral part of life, could not understand the new rules and paid dearly for it. Once he and his wife Puja went to the forest to collect wood and *hama* grass. Unfortunately, Puja was caught by the forester. They had to pay a fine of fifty rupees for which Puja's *kadli* (necklace) had to be sold off. For three days, both the husband and wife slept hungry. Puja even fainted because of hunger.

When Puja's father came to know about the incident, he took Puja with him. After a few days, Punja went to his father-in-law's house to bring her back, but he was insulted by the father-in-law who told him: '*Nanga aadmi, meri beti ko lene kaise aa gaya tu, meri bacchi bhuk se mar jayegi*' (Naked man, why have you come to take my daughter? With you, she will die of hunger). But Puja intervened and told her father that she wanted to go back with Punja.

The incident had shaken Punja so much that he decided to migrate to Gujarat for work, which later became a pattern with him. There was now enough food for the two of them. Also, Puja gave birth to a girl child. Punja was not very happy about it, and hoped that his next child would be a boy. Three years passed and still there were no more children. Punja took Puja to a hospital where the doctor told him that she would not be able to have more children. Even after spending a lot of money on medication, for which Punja had to take credit, Puja could not conceive. Punja

was heartbroken; he knew that his daughter would have to be married off and they would be all alone in their old age.

For their daughter's marriage, Punja went back to Gujarat. The desire to marry their daughter in a better house was so strong that Punja and Puja voluntarily started eating less and inferior quality grain. Both of them switched to eating *mailo* that was very difficult to digest and often led to pain in the lower stomach and constipation. Their dream of getting the daughter married in a nice house was fulfilled. They were even able to give her a bed, quilt, mattress, and jewellery for the wedding. Once the daughter was married, Punja and Puja were not just left penniless but were also burdened with debts from many people in the village. Old age was near and they also had to arrange for repaying the loans taken for their daughter's wedding. Once again, the process of back-breaking work started. Even when there was work available, both Punja and Puja could do heavy work, and days of hunger returned.

Despite their fear of going into the forests, Punja again started collecting wood. But by then the situation had changed, and due to new means of cooking, wood had less value. The forests had also got so depleted that there wasn't much to be found. Half of what they earn goes in repaying the loan taken for their daughter's wedding, after which there is very little left for food. Sometimes, when no food is available and hunger is too much to bear, *puar* is eaten for days; there is not even money to have *makai chapattis*. When hunger becomes unbearable, they ask their neighbours for food. Neither Punja nor Puja get old age pensions. Even if they are able to save some money by selling wood, they have to buy their ration at a higher price since they do not have a BPL card.

What hurts them most is the betrayal by their daughter, who, after her marriage, came just twice to visit them. When she came for the first time, Punja was so excited that he made a *khaat* (wooden bed) for her husband in three days so that they did not have to sleep on the floor. But now she never comes and it seems to them that they never had any daughter. Puja says that they never



expected any financial help from her. Only if she would come to visit them at times, it would make them feel somebody was there for them.

## 6. Shankar

Shankar starts narrating his life by saying: 'It is not the people of the village who exclude me as much as my own brothers. They keep saying '*Tulta tere ko maar denge*' ('Broken man, we will kill you'). They are the same brothers with whom I have lived and who are my own. My own family has severed blood ties and now they have come down to violence because of mere greed and my powerlessness.' The early part of Shankar's life was spent working so that his parents and siblings didn't go to bed on an empty stomach. However, gratitude faded away with time.

We met Shankar Manaat in his home, a brown hut. A gaze inside the house was enough for us to realise that this house must have seen better days. The signs of a better past lay scattered, overshadowed by an impoverished present. We could see a broken *palang* (a wooden bed), and some old calendars; but along with these, we also saw torn clothes and weather-beaten utensils. It was a typical home of a person who had once migrated to the city in search of labour.

Shankar told us that his parents used to sell wood, and were able to earn enough to buy one or one and a half kilograms of grain, which had to be equally distributed. The family comprised six people and the grain was too little, so he never ever got more than half a *roti*, but the forest was there to take care of his food needs.

In spite the hardships faced by them, Shankar's parents sent him to school where he studied till class six. Shankar, while narrating his growing up years, told us that: 'when children grow, so does the stomach. But the quantity of food sometimes remains the same.' To sustain themselves, after coming back from school, all the children used to graze cattle. Learning to earn his own living became a lesson

learnt very early for Shankar. Also, there was no other resort except dying of hunger, which is too slow a poison which the body takes in bit by bit, leaving a gnawing pain in the stomach.

It was time for Shankar to take on more responsibilities. As the eldest son, he had a duty towards the family. Thus, Shankar went to work in Gujarat. Before going, Shankar had given much thought to the decision and had eventually decided in favour of it. Since he had not been able to study and there wasn't much food in the home, he thought that his working in Gujarat would ease the situation. Shankar did not want his family to sleep hungry at nights. He also did not want his brothers to become like him: an uneducated man who succumbed to hunger and poverty.

In Gujarat, Shankar started working in a hotel where he used to get 25 rupees a month (back in 1976), and food. Out of this, he used to send 20 rupees home for his father, brother and sister. For two years, Shankar worked in a hotel after which he started working in an *arandi* (oil extraction) mill. The work was very hazardous but the money was good. He earned twelve rupees a day, out of which he saved ten rupees daily. Shankar told us with a smile that he survived by eating just *chana* in the mornings and evenings.

The work in the factory was too excruciating for Shankar. His body had become quite weak due to semi-starvation and couldn't take the work anymore. One day, while working, he fainted in the mill. That day, Shankar decided to go back to working in the hotel again. Even though the money was less, he would be safer. Working in the hotel also meant that he could eat as much as he wanted for free. After a while, he felt ashamed of sending twenty rupees home and so he left the hotel and went back to his village.

For a few months, Shankar liked staying in the village, but he realised that his not working in Gujarat was costing his family a lot. He could see that the food that was being served was getting less and less, and every alternate day it was *puar bhaji*. Shankar went back to Ahmedabad and once again started working in a hotel. For three years, life went on as usual. He got his sister married; the



brothers had also grown up and one of them started working in Dungarpur. In a way, Shankar's burden was shared.

The monotony of a simple but happy life was broken by a cruel turn of events. While working in the hotel, one day, a cylinder stove burst and Shankar got severely burnt. After a long stay in the hospital, Shankar was back in the village. Whatever he had saved had been spent in paying hospital bills. Once again, days without food started haunting him and there were times when there was nothing in the house to eat. Eventually, came a point when the whole family had to go without food for a day and have only one meal on others.

Shankar had no choice but to go back to Ahmedabad. This time, he started working as a helper in a truck. He was paid 120 rupees a month, and though he kept on sending money home, he still saved some of it, and got married. Marriage brought with it additional expenses, worries and insecurities. Shankar said: "If I sleep hungry for a night, it is okay. But how could I let my wife go hungry?" He again migrated to Ahmedabad in search of a job. This time he started working with Green Road Transport as a helper. His salary was 350 rupees a month and food, and gradually his salary increased. Shankar reminisces about that time fondly, as only during that time did his family have security and did not have to worry about food. He remembers the phase with a wistful look in his eyes, remembering his own body, his two hands that were capable of working and could provide food and security to his family.

However, life didn't go smoothly for long. In 1994, he met with an accident in which his hand came under a truck's wheel. The driver of the truck took him to Udaipur and left him there. In Udaipur, he underwent an operation in which three of his fingers were severed. His elbow had also been fractured badly in the accident so he had to undergo treatment for a longer time. Penniless and lying in a hospital, Shankar realised the real helplessness of his situation when his wife and daughter came to

meet him in Udaipur after taking money from someone on credit. The money was enough for them to come to Udaipur, but they couldn't go back. His wife asked the owner of the agency to give her some money so that she and his daughter could go back home. After much harassment, the employer put them on a truck to take them back. In the truck, Shankar's wife was mistreated and the driver molested her.

After a prolonged silence and with much difficulty, Shankar said a disabled person's wife is not safe. Society knows that her husband would not be able to support her so they can do anything with her and get away with it. What really saddens him is that all this happened in front of his daughter who was terrified. Shankar further told us that he wanted to go back with his wife and daughter but the owner did not let him go. After seven days, he again went



Shankar's daughters want to eat sweets on Diwali, but there is nothing.



to the owner and asked for money so that he could go back. This time the owner warned him and told him never to come back again. After that, he left without any money.

Since 1994, Shankar lives at home in his village. Since his hand is broken and he was the only earning member in his family, they have to live in poverty. As his hand is broken, he does not get much work. When we asked him about his brothers, Shankar just smiled and said: 'When the money stopped coming, everybody split and left us alone (his wife and two daughters).' Life had to go on. Shankar once again started working in a hotel where he used to wash glasses. But since he could not use his hand, he washed glasses by keeping them between his legs for a grip. The hotel owner did not like this, and told him not to come to work. Shankar is now a broken man. Since there is no money at home, he can't send his daughters to school.

Shankar mentioned that he had a small piece of land which he could have sold and bought some cattle. But his land has been usurped by his own brothers. If he goes to the ration shop, the dealer tells him to come the next day. And when he goes again the next day, he is told the same thing. He listens and goes back home helplessly. At the end, Shankar just says: 'Sometimes I wish I were alone. I would have managed somehow. But with a family, it is very different. This Diwali, there was nothing in my house. My daughters wanted to eat sweets. It is at these times when I feel that I have failed my own family.'

### 7. Vali Haja

At the age of forty seven, Vali Haja noticed something different on her feet: a round purplish spot. Her first reaction to it was to ignore it as a mere insect bite. Living a life where the most important question was how and where to get the next meal of the day did not permit one to take into account inane things like a tiny spot on one's feet. Moreover, she was already worried about her husband, who was working hard to cultivate a piece of land which might not

fulfil their hopes for a better future.

The land which their forefathers had cultivated now lay submerged beneath water, beneath big dreams of modernisation and nation-building. Earlier, the 'dam officials' had told them this was a 'miniscule cost for making their village lush and green' and also that the government would provide them a rehabilitation package, which turned out to be a piece of barren land on the slope of a mountain in place of their fertile land in the valley. The dam was built and water was abundant, as promised. However, the water was not meant for their use, but for people whom they did not know and to whom they did not give their land.

When Vali first saw the land given to them in lieu of her own land, her heart sank. A farmer's daughter, she took one look at it and knew that nothing was going to grow there, and times would never be the same. Her husband Haja Damor believed that with a lot of hard work and investment, the barren land could be made fertile. This dream and determination had been costing them money and sweat. Jewellery had already gone and cows had been sold to get seeds and fertilisers. Times were so hard that her only son had stopped going to school so that he could be of help. For six months, the family ate one meal a day and saved money. Her husband believed that money and labour would change the barren land into cultivable land. Vali kept pace with her husband's dreams, at least on the surface.

After two months, the spot on her feet had become white and other patches appeared as well. This time she thought she might tell her husband about it. But seeing him engrossed with the land where nothing would grow and all the money and labour that would go to waste were his attention diverted, she changed her mind. Moreover, a few spots at this age were not a grave issue. Gradually, in another year, Vali started seeing similar spots on her hand whilst her feet had become fully white. She knew that her son and daughter had been right in suspecting that she had *kodh* (leprosy).



Vali vaguely knew that leprosy was a dreaded disease but she had practically no knowledge about it apart from having seeing lepers in Udaipur. She had noticed that their hands and feet were white, without fingers and toes. Her husband had then told her about leprosy. He had also told her that it was infectious. But she had never given it any thought apart from that passing moment when she had seen lepers. She could not remember what she felt at that moment, pity or aversion. Gradually, Vali started having difficulty in walking; her toes started rotting. She saw her toes being eaten up by something within her own body, her disease was consuming her. Haja took her to a hospital in Dungarpur where she was officially diagnosed as suffering from leprosy. The doctors told her that her hands and feet will never be the same again but through medicines, the infection could be restricted and stopped.

For the second time in half a decade, Vali realised how much her life had changed. Though losing their land was something which hadn't been in their hands, they had suffered and lost everything. Her disease took away the last bit of hope. Being a burden to the family for which she was supposed to be a caregiver was a hard role to accept. Despite Haja's hard work, the land did not yield results. The family ate only when Haja and his son could work as labourers. Work was not easy to come by, so semi-starvation continued.

Haja was distressed about his wife's disease but for him the more important worry was how to get money for her treatment. Haja sold the only asset left with them, his oxen. Vali's jewellery was already sold in trying to cultivate the barren land. As it was a distress sale, he ended up getting only 500 rupees for it, which was better than nothing. For Haja, this money would buy relief for Vali at least for some time.

Haja bought medicines for 300 rupees and he kept the rest of the money for food as he was unable to find work. No one was willing to give them work, fearing that they might be carrying the disease. The medicines had to be bought but he couldn't think in terms of starving his family also. Vali needed the food to take the

medicines. Earlier, he had worked as a labourer and Vali had run the household by grazing cattle, which supplemented their meagre income. Now Vali was unable to walk, leave alone graze cattle. So Haja was the sole provider for his family.

Eventually, all the money was spent and only 250 grams of *makai* was left in the house. The family was near starvation. The only option was to send his son, now grown up, to Gujarat where he could earn some money to supplement the family income so as to help with his mother's medicines. Moreover, his sister, who was barely eleven, had to be married off as early as possible. For two years, Vali's son dutifully kept sending small amounts of money and Vali was treated regularly, but her daughter's marriage was looming large. Medicine was taking up lots of money. In this time of crisis, Vali decided that her daughter's marriage should take priority, after which half-filled stomachs would have to be filled.

Vali did not want to ruin the chances of better lives for her children. At the age of thirteen, Vali's daughter was married off and the son was also married within the year. By this time, her disease had deteriorated and there was food in the house for two meals a day. Vali thought that having a daughter-in-law would mean help with the household chores, but unfortunately she was wrong. By the time the son got married, Vali's leprosy had spread dramatically. Her hands and feet had become disfigured. The daughter-in-law was so scared of coming near her that she didn't venture out of the small room which belonged to her, and even kept separate earthen utensils for Vali. Her son also started staying away from her and her daughter refused to come back from her husband's house.

Soon, her son took his wife and left for Gujarat. It was a relief for Vali as she now didn't have to be excluded from her own house. She was not caged in her room anymore, but somehow that didn't ease the pain of losing her children. The son who supported them till then by sending some money changed his attitude. The money became less and less, and was sent irregularly.



With no money, Haja started working as a casual labourer for his and his wife's survival. By this time, Vali was not even able to eat on her own or walk. She had to be bathed and fed. For Haja, this was a very difficult situation, because not only had he to look after himself and his wife, he also had to search for work. Returning home empty-handed didn't hurt him as much as seeing his wife in the condition she was. Haja was able to feed her in the morning but she couldn't eat in the afternoon as there was nobody to feed her. Vali's desire to eat even a simple *roti* was difficult in the given circumstances: there was no one to put the *roti* in her mouth bit by bit. *Rabri* was more convenient to feed. Sometimes, Haja even gave her dal and rice when he was able to earn a little more money. For Vali, drinking water when Haja is away for work is a traumatic exercise that takes half an hour. Vali doesn't blame Haja when he doesn't cook at home: she knows that there is no food in the house: not even *puar* or *ber* for which one has to go to the forest, collect it, dry it and boil it for long to make *rotis* or *laddoos*. The only feeling she has for him is that of gratitude for taking care of her and treating her with respect, something which she doesn't even get from her own children, forget about society.

Vali says it is difficult to sleep at nights as she just keeps lying down the whole day. She hates her helplessness, and hates to see her husband tired and still cooking for them. Vali herself doesn't want to be treated: she is bitter about it and thinks that if she would have saved the money spent on her treatment, life would have been simpler for her husband. Her life and emotions are centred around the man who has done more for her than anyone else. The only wish she has is of a quicker death. At times when the wounds of her feet and hands start festering, the only way that she is able to curb it is by applying acid (HCl). Vali says that *tezab* helps her hand as it just burns the wound and offers relief for at least some time.

## 8. Somi

As a child, Somi used to take the cattle for grazing. When she would get hungry, she would eat *ber*. However, in summers, forest products were also scarce and often there used to be no grain in the house; at such times sleeping hungry was routine. At an age when children like to play, Somi was married off to a visually impaired man. When we got talking to her, Somi first said that she was too young to understand what marriage was. Later, she says: 'We all have dreams and even if we try, we cannot control them.'

In her dreams, Somi had visualised an ordinary man with a little piece of his own land and some cattle; a husband who would love her and take care of her. The reality that awaited her was quite different. Not only was her husband visually impaired, he was also much older than her. He did own a piece of land, but it was infertile. On the brighter side, her in-laws liked her very much. She says: 'I used to work so much that they had to like me.' The family was poor but it did not bother Somi much. In her own words, "*Jab kuch dekha ho to man lalachata hai*" (You only desire for something when you have seen it). Since she had not seen any other life in which food and clothes were easily available, poverty was the only way of living. She says: 'It is easier to be poor when you know that you are not the only one facing it and there is somebody to share poverty with'.

Initially, married life for Somi was comparably better and even happier. She and her husband made a separate hut for themselves and started cultivating the little piece of land he owned, but clearly it was not enough to sustain them. So Somi's husband, though visually impaired, started undertaking odd jobs in the village.

Somi gave birth to two daughters and a son. Life was going smoothly for Somi: there was not much food in the house, but the children never slept on empty stomachs. They could not buy new clothes for the children, but they had enough money to buy them second-hand clothes. This somewhat smooth flow of life was broken by the death of Somi's husband after a prolonged illness. She does



not remember the exact year her husband died. What she remembers is that the children were still very young. From then on, her life has been a steep fall into abject poverty. The social exclusion that followed was too much for even Somi to bear, who, by her own admission, has experienced poverty since she was born.

For a few days, Somi was too numb to think about anything. She still hoped her brothers-in-law would provide her support. But gradually Somi realised that her in-laws were not willing to support her and her children. The same relatives who had cared for her changed overnight. For them, giving food to her children for a few days became a burden. To support her children, she tried to take on casual work in the village. This was not liked by her in-laws. Whenever she went to work, her elder brother-in-law commented: '*Ek mar gaya, to doosra karne gayi hai*' (One has died so she had gone in search for another one). He even went further and spread rumours that she earned money through immoral acts. Somi told us that when her husband was alive, it was easier for her to go out and work but not after becoming a widow. '*Raand aur randi me bahut kam antar samjhate hai log*' (People don't consider much difference between a young widow and a prostitute), she points out.

Once her husband died, her brothers-in-law turned her out of the hut in which she and her husband lived. Alone and with no support from relatives, Somi went to live in her maternal village. Her parents and brothers made a separate hut for her, after which she was left to fend for herself and her children. Leaving her husband's village also meant that she could not claim her husband's land (even though it was too little and infertile).

The only way for her to make a living and sustain her children was through collecting wood from the forest illegally, and selling it in the adjoining village market. After collecting the wood in the dead of the night (as there was always the danger of getting caught during the day), it had to be immediately taken to the city of Dungarpur for selling. Selling wood, Somi was barely able to manage

four to five rupees a day, and from this money, she would buy food or grain.

She also used to make brooms from *khajur* leaves. She even used to get *hama* from the forest and roast it for food. She recalls that one time she had fallen sick and there was no food in the house. The situation was so bad that the children had not eaten for two days and there was nothing in the house to cook. Her children were very hungry and they were running towards the *chullah* (oven) all the time. Somi could not bear the pain of her children and thus went into the forest despite her ill-health and collected some wood as well as *ber* for her children to eat. Somi was able to look after her children, and, as time passed, her children grew up. Getting wood from the adjoining forest was becoming difficult, and the Forest Department guards had caught her twice and harassed her.

Left with no option, Somi sent her son to work as a domestic servant at the house of a teacher. She used to take her daughter with her to the forest to collect wood. The son worked in the teacher's house for six years. She says he used to get food two times a day and two pairs of clothes a year. However, understanding the irony of sending her only son to work at a school teacher's house and not being able to educate him, Somi says in a defensive tone that when food is a rarity, nobody thinks about education. '*Zinda rahega tabhi to padhega na?*' (He can study only if he is alive, right?). But this guilt of not being able to educate her children keeps haunting Somi all the time as she kept on repeating that her poverty was due to her illiteracy.

In spite of the hardships Somi faced, she is proud of the fact that she was able to get both her daughters married. However, she says that has put a huge financial strain on her as society expects a lot of things. Also, her brothers were not able to help her as they themselves did not have money. It is not the financial difficulties and poverty that hurt her: what hurts her most is that even at her own daughter's and son's weddings, she was not allowed to sit near the *mandap*. She says that it is only those women who are not allowed



to attend their children's weddings who can understand the pain and humiliation of it. But then she consoles herself by saying that if her being away can make her children's lives better, then it is better for her to stay away. Being a widow also meant hearing taunts like 'The widow has gone ahead of us.' Losing status as a married woman also meant no more credit: 'When my husband was alive, we never had any problem in getting provisions on credit. A man can get credit from anywhere, he can ask many people. But with women, it is very difficult to get credit. People are not willing to give credit,' she says.

In weaker moments, she admits that earlier she had thought that her son and daughters would look after her. But that did not happen. She justifies it by telling herself they are married into poor families, so 'how can they help?' At present, Somi is 76 but even at this age she keeps searching for work. She gets a widow's pension but it is clearly not enough and she needs to sustain herself through other means. Not getting work also means that there is no choice of what to eat; whatever is given or what she can afford is what she eats: '*Akhir pet to bharna hai*' (After all, I have to fill my stomach).

However, it is the nights that are difficult to get by. Insecurity about the future keeps her awake all night. In the end, Somi says she is dependent on God: 'Whatever He will do to me is acceptable: whether making me live or giving me death.'

### 9. Kamala Haja

The smell that greets one while entering Kamala Haja's mud hut is not the familiar and lingering smell of food being cooked or a recently eaten meal. It is that of rotting *mahua* flowers, which is nauseating. Oblivious to the smell of the filth around, Kamala sits between earthen pots and pans on one side for brewing alcohol for her customers, and cooking vessels on the other side for making *rotis* for her children. This contradiction defines Kamala's life.

Kamala Haja is a young mother whose day starts in an unusual manner: by collecting *mahua* pods from the nearby forest, by no

means an easy task. The best pods usually fall in the night and to collect them, she has to get up early in the morning and go to the nearby forest. The procedure keeps her occupied the whole day. She knows that even a day's rest would cost her a lot. Once the pods are collected, Kamala hurriedly returns home to start brewing the *hooch* so that her customers do not go empty-handed.

The process is a tedious and dangerous one, and requires at least seven days of preparation. First, collecting *mahua* illegally from the forest (now that the forests do not belong to them but to the government), then soaking it in water for four to five days, and after that brewing it for long hours. It is a process that takes most of her energy and corrodes her spirit. Earlier, in her lonely moments, Kamala used to lacerate herself about the whole situation: a young widow making and selling alcohol to sustain her children and herself. But now she has stopped worrying about it. There is no time as children have to be fed and her old mother-in-law has to be cared for.

Apart from dealing with a rowdy crowd on which depends her survival, sometimes Kamala's *handi* is broken by the customers, sometimes abuses follow and propositions are made. But Kamala takes it all in her stride as this is how she is able to ward off hunger from her house. However, what hurts her most is when comments are made about her young daughter, barely ten years old.

We ask her why she has chosen this particular profession. Belligerently, Kamala replies: '*Raand ko kaam kaam dega? Sab sochte hai aadmi doondh rahi hai*' (Who will give work to a widow? Everybody thinks she is searching for a man). Nevertheless, she tells us that she initially tried to do honest and hard work to make her family survive, but all her efforts were in vain. She then decided to brew alcohol.

Faced with near-starvation after her husband's death, grief had taken a secondary place in Kamala's mind. There was some grain left in the house but Kamala knew that it would be over within three days. The only way to feed her children was through making



*rabri* so that the grain lasted a few days. Once the grain finished, there was nothing left in the house. For another few days, people in the village supported her by giving grain. But the issue that was haunting Kamala was how long they would survive on people's donations. Left with no alternative, Kamala had to rely on manual labour. During the day, she used to work in the fields, and at night she used to go and collect wood from the forest for some additional income.

While working sometimes in others' fields, Kamala could see the little patch of land, the same land which her husband was so particular to cultivate so that there would be food at least for some months. Some months of food security would have also meant that he would not have had to go to Gujarat and could spend more time with his family. The same land now lay barren and arid.

Earlier, when the belief that if she worked hard she would be able to sustain herself was still alive in her, she had thought she would cultivate the small patch of land that belonged to her husband and probably buy some goats by selling her jewellery. But her elder brother-in-law did not like the idea of her being independent. The motive behind this was that he wanted her to leave the village and go back to her mother's house. He employed all kinds of pressure for this from character assassination to restricting her movement on the pretext that she was a widow. After all, even a small patch of land could be a treasure: if Kamala could be turned out, then there would be no one to claim it. Kamala knew that once she left, her son's claim on the land would be weakened. So Kamala resolved to stay back and make an honest living. But merely resolving to do so doesn't keep starvation at bay.

Making ends meet was becoming an arduous task as there was no help from the community. There were times when there used to be no food. There were days when Kamala did not get work and returned empty-handed. With no food in the house and no one to help her, Kamala finally gave up and decided to go back to her mother's home. This was a choice more for her children's sake

than her own. She had learnt to survive with hunger, but couldn't see her children doing the same. She didn't want her children to live with hunger.

Kamala knew she would not be welcomed with open arms at her mother's home, but nonetheless she had not thought that her mother would blatantly refuse to keep her and her children in the house. On one hand she was pained by her mother's action, but at another level she understood the reason behind her mother's rejection. Her mother was an old widow herself and was burdened by the responsibility of looking after her mentally unstable brother. There was not enough for them to survive. How would her mother take care of her?

Dejected, Kamala came back to her late husband's house in three days. However, by the time she returned, the hut her husband had built for his family had been taken over by her mother-in-law. This meant that there was one more mouth to feed. Already, Kamala had the burden of feeding her own family, and another mouth to feed was an add-on she couldn't afford.

Kamala started searching for work again, but it was not easy to come. Moreover, she had small children to look after. Whenever she could get any kind of casual work, she took it. For six months, she worked at a *patel's* house cleaning cowsheds. The work required her to stay in the cowshed all the time. Though she got enough to eat for herself, the work provided her with very little money.

The *patel* soon asked her to leave as Kamala took leave in the afternoons to feed her children. With no work and no food in the house, her sole dependence now was on collecting wood, but clearly it was not enough to feed the children. Till this time, Kamala had managed somehow to send her children to school. However, because of unexpected loss of work, it was now becoming impossible for her to do so. Eventually, when there was no money, she took them out of the school. Her husband had told her that children's education was the most important thing for him. Kamala says 'He did not know that at some point they may even die for want of food.' But it



hurt her more than the nights of gnawing hunger that she had to discontinue their education.

Out of desperation, she even mortgaged her *kadla* for 200 rupees with which she got some *makai* and fed everyone. The problem was averted for a few days but she did not know what to do next. By this time, her resolve had broken and she had given up trying to feed her children through honest work.

That same night, Kamala started collecting *mahua* pods from the nearby forest. This was a difficult choice for her, but somehow life had to go on and there was no place for morals when the choice was between dying and living. However, Kamala had thought it would be a stop-gap arrangement, and as soon as her widow pension (which amounted to 150 rupees after deducting commission and transport to Durgapur) would come, she would buy wheat with her BPL card, and then start looking for other work, maybe even go to Gujarat.

Kamala didn't know how wrong she was. Once it became known that she brewed alcohol, people stopped talking to her. Before this, she was living with the stigma of being a widow; now Kamala also became an immoral young widow whom nobody wanted to give work. Social exclusion was something Kamala had thought about, but she didn't realise that the same people who came to buy liquor from her in the night would taunt her in daylight.

With much difficulty, she managed to find work as a labourer in a different village. She was paid less and half of her time was spent in commuting across the difficult terrain. Her second son became gravely ill and her mother-in-law refused to look after him, saying that a woman who does immoral work has to face the curse of God. Kamala asked us: 'Which God? Where was the God when my children were dying?'

Afraid of the wrath of the community, her mother-in-law left her house and started living separately, but not a day went by when Kamala was not greeted by her taunts. At present, Kamala brews alcohol on a regular basis. She is hounded by rough elements but

takes life as it comes. She has finally given up hope of earning an honest living. Money is still not enough, but at least the children get something to eat. Even in the business of alcohol, her powerlessness as a widow and a single woman are barriers: '*Sharaabi kam paisa dete hain aur matka bhi tod dete hain*' (The drunkards give me less money and sometimes even break my jugs of liquor), she says.

Her constant worry is that she may not be able to find suitable matches for her daughters to get married. Her daughters and son tell her: '*Galat dhandha karti hai. Hum ko mud dikahne ke layak nahin choda*' (She does immoral business. She has not left us able to face society). However, her immediate happiness is that this month she saved enough money to buy second hand clothes for her children. About her own tattered clothes, she only laughs and says if she starts wearing new clothes, people will start saying: '*Doosra pati dhoondh liya hai, daru nahi bechti, dhandha karti hai*' (She has taken another husband and she does not sell liquor but does prostitution).

## 10. Kava

Kava is approximately in his sixties. For him, time is measured by the days he goes without food, and nights when hunger hasn't let him sleep. 'If I had any children or had a wife, then I would have had food to eat,' he says. Kava was born with a congenital condition where both his legs were conjoined. For him, life has been about crawling from place to place. How much can two hands carry a body, or rather how far? Now he is at a stage where the hands are giving up. The weakness that accompanies old age has got to his hands, leaving him almost immobile and at the mercy of passersby. Kava was looking forward to meeting the research team; he told us: 'At least some one would listen to me and try to understand my problems' or maybe it was more like he just wanted someone to talk with him.

Kava does not remember much about his childhood, though he told us he was born with his legs conjoined and lifeless. He doesn't



have memories which actually constitute childhood. He told us when his parents were alive, they used to look after him and give him food, but life was not easy as even during those times food was difficult to get. 'My parents were my life-givers and had shielded me from hunger, from being roofless,' he says.

All that Kava remembers of his childhood are days of intense hunger, days of eating wild shrubs, sometimes only wild berries, which used to hurt the stomach. When there was no food, his parents collected wood from the forests and walked for one-and-a-half days to sell it and get food in return. As he was physically disabled, he couldn't walk and helplessly waited for his family to come back with food, waiting at least three days. He thus learnt the lessons of hunger quite early in life. There were no clothes, just one cloth to wear and later use as a coverlet in the night. When it got cold and the coverlet was not a shield against winter, his parents would burn wood and they slept near it on the warm grass. Since his parents were poor and given the prevailing belief that disabled children cannot study as they lack grey matter, Kava's parents did not send him to school. Kava still feels hurt about it and says that his parents sent his brothers to school, but not him.

At present, Kava lives with his brother's family and to support himself, he grazes his brother's cattle. We wanted to meet him in the house but Kava was not very comfortable with the idea. He felt his sister-in-law would not take to it kindly, so we met him near the place where he grazed cattle. When we asked him whether he got enough to eat, Kava kept quiet for a few moments. He then said he ate whatever leftovers were given to him at his brother's place. Sometimes it means just half a *chappati* and he often sleeps hungry. But if he wants to eat something more filling, he tries to get it from his 'old age pension'. During festivals, Kava says: 'All the members of the family wear good clothes and eat good things. I neither get the clothes nor the good things to eat.' Some days he gets food just once a day. Kava feels if he were married, his life would have been better. Somebody would have

been there to cook for him, and he also would have celebrated festivals.

Kava, who until then was narrating his life without any visible signs of emotions, started crying profusely. He then told us that now he is old and would like to rest. 'Grazing cattle is not an easy job, but if I didn't do it then I would not get any *roti* in the night,' he said. We asked him about what he ate in the afternoons; Kava's look was enough to tell us his afternoons were spent hungry. Still crying, he told us, '*Jaanwar bhi uski sunte hai jiske pair hote hai, nirbal ko sab marne hai*' (Even animals listen to those who have legs, a powerless person is attacked by all). While grazing cattle in the field, an ox tried to gore him. He felt powerless as he could not defend himself. All he could do was cry for help. Once when Kava fell ill, there was no one to take him to the hospital. So he dragged himself all the way. In the middle of the road, dogs started barking at him and he got so scared, he came back half-way. Kava tells us he has filled many government forms for help but somehow none of them get passed. He could drive a tricycle if he gets one, he says.

He also told us that in spite of his disability, he has never got more than ten kilograms of grain from the ration shop. Even if he goes to the open market, the shopkeeper does not give him anything on credit. The question is always '*Tu paisa kahan se layega?*' (Where will you get the money from?) The panchayat office happens to be seven kilometres away from his house, a distance impossible for him to crawl. If he tries to go, animals attack him and try to bite him. If the panchayat office or the ration shop were nearer to his house, he would have tried his best to get his pension and foodgrains, which are due to him. If the hospital were nearer to his house, he could have gone there every time he fell ill. He tells us that he is tired of being a burden on people who don't want to carry him anymore.

There are times when he craves for nice food and wishes he could eat nice things. When he does not get food and is very hungry, he asks his elder brother's wife. She gives him some food, the way



she might give it to a dog or a beggar, that too not at an appropriate time, and sometimes he just sleeps hungry. Most times he just eats once a day and then endures the rest of the day on a hungry stomach. 'I am not responsible for being handicapped; I have been handicapped since I can remember,' he says. He reminds us of the fact that being a disabled person means that one doesn't retire from work. He doesn't have the privilege to retire: he doesn't have anyone to look after him, and he ends up doing the most tedious and difficult work to sustain himself. He drags himself on difficult terrain, his hands having grown thick with calluses from thorns embedded in them over the years. He continues in a tone that has lost hope: 'I don't think that there will be any improvement in my situation now. Nothing has changed till now; I am just going from bad to worse.'

## ANDHRA PRADESH

### 1. Anantiah

Aashaiah had borrowed Rs. 900 from a wealthy man in the village to buy medicines for his wife. With nothing else to pledge, Aashaiah forfeited his labour against the debt. Unfortunately, the money could not save the woman; she died, and the aggrieved husband soon followed her. They left behind two orphaned children. The eight-year-old son, Anantiah, was now responsible for bringing up his younger sister and for repaying the loan. It was decided by the creditor that Anantiah would work for him for nine years in the fields, repaying Rs. 100 each year.

Though not uncommon elsewhere in India, this narrative belongs to Narayanpur, a village in Vikarabad Mandal of Andhra Pradesh, in the year 1971. India, a democratic sovereign socialist republic, had adopted a Constitution (1949) that directed the government to ban all forms of forced labour.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the first legislation against bonded labour took a good quarter of a century to come by.<sup>3</sup> During the three decades since the legislation, prosecution has been largely neglectful and most vigilance committees formed by the Act are virtually non-functional.

2 Article 23 of the Indian constitution bans trafficking in human beings and forced labour.

3 The Bonded Labour Act was passed in 1976. It defines 'bonded labour' by three important criteria: debt or advance against which labour is rendered, payment below minimum wages and absence of freedom to change employment.



The rate of repayment was deliberately kept low as the 'master' insisted that Anantiah was too young to command a grown man's wages and he also had low visibility in one eye. He gave Anantiah two meals a day, a lunch of four small *taidal* (a coarse cereal) *rotis* and dinner comprising *korabua* (inferior quality rice). Anantiah took the food home and shared it with his sister. He toiled in the fields cultivating food, but once the crop was harvested, he wasn't allowed to touch it. Meals were served to him from a distance and his vessels were not allowed in the house. Anantiah is a Dalit, the so-called 'untouchable' caste to which most bonded labourers belong. According to government figures,<sup>4</sup> 86.6 per cent of bonded labourers are Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Presently, it is argued that distribution of castes in bondage varies greatly, depending on the sector of activities. However, some estimates suggest that Dalits constitute nearly 100 per cent of bonded labourers in agriculture.

At the end of five years, when Anantiah had repaid Rs. 500, he had to take a further advance of Rs. 600 to arrange for his sister's marriage. This added six more years of bondage to his life. Soon, an aunt arranged for Anantiah's marriage with a girl from Hyderabad. The marriage lasted barely a few months, as the girl could not adjust with the tough conditions of his village. Anantiah was left without a family again.

Anantiah had two acres of inherited land that did not yield much. However, with unwavering determination to move out of bondage, Anantiah cultivated it alongside his master's. Working assiduously for years, Anantiah was successful in repaying the loan. He was 22 years old when he repaid the loan completely. All these years, the repayment rate remained unchanged.

When free from bonded labour, Anantiah migrated to the

adjoining Tandur Mandal for better livelihood opportunities, and did various odd jobs from construction to working in stone quarries and agriculture. He had a relationship with a woman and they had a daughter. Anantiah had put together some savings through the years. He invested them in buying a little piece of land and built a house, anticipating marriage. Unfortunately, the woman refused to marry him, citing caste as a reason. Her infuriated relatives forced Anantiah (for having dared to procreate with a high caste woman) into transferring the home in the name of the woman. He did so and says he does not regret it because he truly loved the woman and built the house for her to live in.

After this, Anantiah came back to his village, only to face another misfortune. In his absence, a distant relative had appropriated his land. Politically influential as he was, he hoisted a red flag on the land, symbolising his authority over it. Anantiah's pleas to get back his land went unheard. The land, though agriculturally unproductive, faces the main road of the village, and with the expanding twin cities, the prices were sure to soar in the near future. Anantiah called a panchayat meeting, giving away Rs 5000 in bribe, but to no avail. He could not afford to press the matter further. To pay a bribe, Anantiah had to borrow money from his old master and put himself in bondage again. With nowhere else to go, Anantiah started to live with his aunt and further borrowed a sum of Rs 1000 for his daily expenditure.

At present, bondage has disguised itself into newer, smaller and contractual forms, emerging in modern industries and informal sectors like brick kilns, stone quarries and the silk industry in particular.<sup>5</sup> However, the more traditional form characterised by

4 Ministry of Labour, Government of India, *Annual Report 2000-2001*, page 181. Quoted in Human Rights Watch, *Small Change*, January 2003, page 41.

5 For more details, please see: Srivastava, Ravi S., "Bonded Labour in India: its incidence and pattern," 2005. Working paper commissioned as an input to the ILO Director-General's second global report on forced labour, entitled *A global alliance against forced labour*, prepared for the 93rd session of the International Labour Conference in June 2005.



debt and intergenerational bondage continues to survive and is not merely residual. Various studies<sup>6</sup> have shown that though agricultural operations are becoming less feudal, the bonded labour system has attuned itself to the capitalist mode of agriculture.

Three years later, the same aunt arranged for Anantiah's marriage again. After marriage, Anantiah moved on to live in the old, discarded gram panchayat office that lay vacant in the village. He draws an analogy between the dilapidated office and his life. In the house, the roof is broken, and during rains, enough water fills the house to make his utensils float. Similarly, his hope of a better life for which he struggled in his youth is now shattered, filling life with enduring sorrow. There isn't any cot, nor any bed sheet or clothes in the house. Its fragile old walls can collapse at any moment. Similarly, Anantiah's life has no joy, no freedom and no ambition. Recently, Anantiah has been granted a house under the Indira Awas Yojna. But the first instalment of money has been delayed beyond his patience.

The exigencies in life continue to befall. Most serious are the health expenditures that cannot be ignored. Last year, his infant son suffered jaundice. Anantiah not only had to borrow some money for treatment but also had to work many extra hours, past midnight, to be allowed a day off to take the child to the government hospital in the nearest town, Vikarabad. For two weeks, he hopped between the hospital and his master's fields to balance labour and familial responsibility. During this time, he missed his dinner at the master's house and lived on a cup of black tea.

Anantiah's wife suffered a miscarriage last year and since then she has been in poor health. The family had to bear additional expenditure for her operation and lost the meagre but essential wages that she contributed through scarcely available casual wage labour. If the government delays money for the house under its

own scheme, should he trust the same government to make available credit for his needs which are more pressing, he asks.

He regrets his near-blindness in one eye. Although he works as much as any other person, his visual challenge makes his repayment of loan a much slower process than it would otherwise be. Many, like Anantiah, adopt bondage as an immediate coping strategy in a distress situation. However, it leads to a further tightening of the trap. Bonded labourers are paid very little and much of this little amount is deducted against the debt. Therefore, it further increases dependence on debt for survival, rather than enabling accumulation of savings for repayment. Once a person is caught in bondage, his poverty goes beyond income.

Anantiah is given two meals a day for his labour. As before, he eats lunch in the fields and takes dinner home to be shared with his family. Most often, he gets rice with some tamarind chutney and red chillies. The food given is usually leftovers, never hot and has very little curry. Even if Anantiah is hungry, he prefers sleeping after filling his stomach with water rather than begging. He associates shame not so much with begging as an act, as men do have to resort to it under extreme circumstances, but with the thought of being turned down. 'If a person in the village is living with hunger, and a house in the neighbourhood has food, who should go to whom?' he asks. 'If the latter waits for the former to solicit, it is not worth soliciting from him,' he asserts.

His work hours are long, sometimes as long as 10-12 hours, particularly during the sowing and harvesting seasons. If he gets even a little late for work (his job starts at five in the morning), he has to hear abuses from his master. Untouchability continues to prevail. Festivals, he feels, are irrelevant his life, so he eats whatever is given to him by his employer, on festivals as on other days. In the last six years, he has bought no new clothes for himself. He can afford only that which is donated by his master.

Anantiah has been given an *Antyodaya* ration card. Andhra Pradesh has a food coupon system to access the Public Distribution

6 For details, please refer to: CEC, Labour File, volume 4, no. 3



System whereby coupons are distributed annually and ration is released only after the coupon is produced.<sup>7</sup> Anantiah misplaced his coupons when the house got flooded during the rains, and therefore the ration dealer refused to let him collect his ration. Only after talking to the *sarpanch* could he persuade the ration dealer to give him 20 kilograms of rice without coupons.

In its latest annual report (2007-08), the Ministry of Labour claims that 'as a result of concerted efforts made by the government through various anti-poverty programmes, awareness, sensitisation, etc.' the incidence of bonded labour is declining. Anantiah is aware of the Bonded Labour Act. Yet he would not appeal for release or accept his bondage status to the government. He is also aware of his limitations and survival needs in life. His poverty is chronic and livelihood potential in agriculture extremely low and subject to seasonal fluctuations. Loans have to be taken to tide over seasonal shortages or contingent expenditure. Getting a bank loan involves a cumbersome, long drawn process and his needs are immediate.

Being bonded helps him survive; freedom would mean having no anchor. The government would not understand his exigency and vulnerability. To him, his master is his patron, compassionate and benevolent. So great is the dependency that without him, Anantiah would have no existence. 'What reason do I have to want to be free?' he asks.

## 2. Veeramani

When Veeramani's husband took to *ganja* (marijuana), her life took an ugly turn. She had been born in a well-to-do family and married into a rich family. No one had previously ever felt the need to send her to school or to work. But being completely reliant on her

husband, she was rendered vulnerable with his new-found addiction. Initially, he would be ill-tempered, lose his bearings on reality and behave erratically. What followed next was incoherent speech and hysterical body movements. Veeramani had support from her husband's brothers who facilitated his institutional rehabilitation in Vikarabad. However, despite three months of complete care and the hefty expenditure of Rs. 6000, Veeramani's husband felt only slightly better. It was unthinkable for a person from the priestly Jungam caste to be addicted, and so Veeramani's husband was relieved from his services as the head priest of the famed Malikarjuna temple.

Veeramani was born in Kankol in the Ranga Reddy district of Andhra Pradesh. Her father had 30 acres of land. At the tender age of 13, she was married to a distant relative belonging to the same caste. Jungams are priests who perform rituals in temples and conduct marriages. They worship Lord Shiva and smear *vibhuti* (holy ash) on their foreheads. Apart from serving in temples, they are also expected to live on *bhiksha* (alms) given by the affluent and the pious.

Married to a joint family of four brothers, with three acres of land and some cattle, Veeramani had nothing to worry about. Thirteen years ago, the joint family divided amicably. The family was growing and the eldest brother-in-law thought he was being asked to shoulder too much of its responsibility. The land was, therefore, divided and each of them got a share of 0.75 acres of land. Even though the household separated, their familial ties remained strong.

Soon after her husband's discharge from the hospital and continued addiction, the eldest of the brothers died. Since then, Veeramani's husband was reduced to soliciting alms and food in the markets of Vikarabad, an adjacent town. She doesn't like to see him beg. Veeramani says that even a low caste person would be mortified to beg, so for her husband, born in a high caste, it is especially humiliating to beg on the streets. It is to save this last

<sup>7</sup> A food coupon system was introduced in 1998-99 to improve the delivery of rice and kerosene oil. Coupons were denominated in smaller quantities so that a person could buy ration in easy instalments. This system limits the scope of corruption by ration dealers and also reduces the number of bogus cards.



shard of honour that her husband begs in the nearby town of Vikarabad and not within the village itself. However, sometimes even without soliciting, their neighbours, who are aware of their problems, give them some food out of pity.

Veeramani gets teary-eyed as she admits shamefully that her husband has to even beg near liquor shops. However, he doesn't drink himself, Veeramani clarifies quickly. She laments that her husband has lost all sense of responsibility or love for his family. He comes home only to sleep. He eats the edible food items collected in his alms-bowl and keeps all the money to himself. With this money, he eats to his heart's content in hotels in Vikarabad and buys *ganja*. She receives only the most inedible food that he discards. This mostly consists of just a handful of stale vegetables and fruits, worth throwing away.

Veeramani feels that there has been a significant alteration in social trends which has made her even more food insecure. Earlier, people used to respect Jungams and gave generous *bhiksha*. Now although most of them don't say anything to their faces, they penny-pinch and give only what they would anyway dispose.

Agriculture has suffered due to a decrease in rainfall, so the fields don't yield as much. On the one hand, productivity is decreasing, and on the other, many people are shifting to cash crop cultivation, like cotton and sunflower. People have fewer foodgrains available in their stores. Most of them are forced to buy grains from the market. In a situation like this, it is more expedient and economical for them to give a coin or two than foodgrains.

There is also a significant drop in religious fervour and compassion among people. A Jungam *bhikshu*, who was never refused, is now denied alms by many. Some who give do so without any decorum. Some do not give alms regularly, and others simply mutter curses and shove them away. Veeramani feels affronted, but for her husband it is a means of livelihood, and he feels no ignominy anymore. Many years of begging has eroded most of his feelings. Recently, he did not have enough money to spend on transportation

to return home from Vikarabad and so he begged for an old bicycle from a Reddy family in the village. Acutely embarrassed, Veeramani has never crossed the Reddy's house ever since, even if she has to take a longer route. Although people do not pass comments to her face (because of her high caste status), she knows they ridicule her behind her back. This is what makes her feel more dejected.

Two years ago, Veeramani had to sell 0.5 acres of her land for their daughter's marriage. The land was sold for Rs. 2,000. In addition, she also had to borrow Rs. 30,000 from the bank and Rs. 5000 from the local women's self-help group (SHG) group at 2 per cent interest per month. It's difficult to marry daughters in this day and age,' sighs Veeramani. She has sold off all her movable assets like gold jewellery and extra household utensils to raise money for everyday food.

It was three years ago that she applied for and received a ration card. Prior to this, no one offered her a card and neither did she feel the need to possess one. She has an *Antyodaya* card now. However, it has not done much to reduce her burdens. Most months, she does not have enough money to buy her entire stock of ration at one time, so she misses on her ration entitlements altogether.

As a member of the SHG group, she was given a LPG cylinder by the government. But the cylinder is too expensive for her monthly budget, so she is forced to use kerosene oil. However, the ration dealer gives her only two litres of kerosene oil (three litres are usually given) because she already possesses a LPG connection. Accepting poverty as penance, Veeramani says: '*Ma vanthulo elage undhemo bhagavanthudu elage petyadu*' (This is my destiny, God keeps me like this).

Life has taught her to be self-contained. She has started working as an agricultural labourer regularly. Having never worked since childhood, she was initially paid only Rs. 15 for ten hours of arduous work. Now she gets Rs. 30 per day, but the availability of work depends on the month of the year. In good months (sowing and harvesting season), work may be available for 15 days and in



lean months, it is difficult to find even five days of work. So she is left to run her household on a meagre 200-250 rupees per month.

Six months ago, they were sanctioned a house under the Indira Awas Yojana, but they did not build a new house and instead got their old one renovated. However, Veeramani was so distressed by having to run from one government office to another that she feels no sense of appreciation. Moreover, the sarpanch and bank manager took Rs 1000 from her as a bribe to get the house sanctioned.

Her husband doesn't approve of her working as a casual



Veeramani's children feel deprived: ogle at delicacies cooked by neighbours.

labourer, and that too on the land of a Scheduled Caste (SC) farmer. Women are expected to maintain cultural boundaries and the pride of the family much more than men. She requests her low caste employer not to come to her threshold and call her for work, and promises to reach the fields on her own to check for availability. She hides her sickle in her saree and leaves the house ensuring that she returns before her husband does. Her younger daughter, who failed her matriculation exams, refused to continue her studies. She tried to teach her tailoring but met with no success. She also has a 15 year-old son whom she has sent to the famous Srishalam temple in Kurnool district to learn the functions of priesthood. He is her only hope.

Veeramani is allowed credit up to Rs. 500 in the local *kirana* (grocery) shop. However, she prefers not to take it as the grocer may ask for his money back at anytime and if she is not able to pay him back, it will cause a great deal of embarrassment. If there comes a month where her health does not support her, her life hits rock bottom. First, she has to borrow for her treatment and then, as soon as she is well, she has to work long hours of physical labour to repay it. In the hurry to repay, she often suffers a relapse.

Currently, her biggest anxiety is the marriage of her younger daughter who is 16 years of age. This time she doesn't even have land to sell and debts from the elder daughter's marriage remain unpaid. Veeramani has given up all hope of support from her husband and she says nothing to him anymore. Her husband is so captivated by the drug that he says that when he does not have enough energy to beg for money to support his ganja addiction, he will plant a few marijuana trees in their 0.25 acres of land.

Veeramani suffers from daily problems with regard to food. Most times, there is very little or no rice at all. Often, there is no oil and so she is reduced to cooking *dal* or vegetables (collected by her husband) in water. Sometimes, the vegetables are too stale to be eaten so the family has to eat only rice or *roti* with chilly powder, and then their stomachs burn and ache. When she doesn't have



any mustard seeds to put in the oil, she uses the seeds of wild green chillies.

The problem increases during festivals when their everyday compromise with life's wants is disturbed and she wishes that they could eat and celebrate as they used to years ago. Her children keep peeping out of their hut to ogle at the delicacies cooked in their neighbours' homes. Never again can she eat that good quality rice, sighs Veeramani. Endless wrestling with life's miseries has sapped her, but Veeramani struggles on, for there is a daughter to marry off and a son on whom all her hopes for a better future are pinned.

### 3. Ashiya

Ashiya Begum's eyes glistened at the very sight of our research team. She held the door open and said warmly: 'I saw you at my sister's place in Yerravally village. You said you will come to my village too, and you have actually come!' She spread her plastic mat on the floor and invited us to sit. It was a small house with a *kirana* shop in one corner and a kitchen on the other. A few misshapen, darkened and over-used aluminium utensils and the little space of the house certainly didn't seem enough for a family of six.

The moment we finished introducing ourselves, she shot a question in a voice that was rather impatient and challenging, 'Even if I tell you, will you ever be able to feel what we eat?' There was a moment's pause and it was then that we noticed her small yellow eyes that were full of anguish but yet seemed tough. Her hands appeared dark, wrinkled and exhausted as she used them to put a few strands of her hair behind her ear. We thought about her question again and could only muster enough heart to say that if you tell us, we will try our best to feel it. She agreed to talk.

Ashiya Begum was born 48 years ago in Narayanpur, Vikarabad Mandal of Ranga Reddy district in Andhra Pradesh. Her father worked as a security guard in the mango grove located on the outskirts of the village and earned barely enough to keep alive a

family of seven. There was no food, no water and no clothes. Their regular meal was *gongura* (a wild leafy vegetable) and chutney made of boiled tamarind water with a pinch of salt. She confessed that in times of desperate hunger, she had stolen corn from unguarded fields and eaten it raw. Yet she stressed that she felt no remorse because: 'when one is hungry, one only feels hunger, no guilt, no shame.'

At nine, she was married to a 15-year-old rickshaw puller in Mallamora village in the same district. Marriage brought a host of new problems. From the very first morning after marriage, she was sent to do agricultural labour, back-breaking work that she had never done before. Before going to the fields, for a couple of hours in the morning, she had to do household chores and only then was she given a small *roti* to eat by her brother-in-law. The rest of the day was spent in weeding, sowing or irrigating the landlord's fields and the child bride had to sustain herself on one *roti* from the morning. If she dared to ask for another *roti* in the evening, her husband would beat her up. So she waited for him to have mercy on her. And it was rarely that she got lucky.

She didn't know how much her husband earned as he splurged his earnings on *sandhi* (country liquor) and *bidi*. She was left alone to shoulder the responsibility of the entire household. Her memories of her marriage are only a series of beatings, toiling in the field, interrupted only by pregnancies. There were brief phases of separation when she went to her mother's house hoping that her husband would be forced to compromise and would come to take her back with promises of better behaviour. But her hopes failed every time. She always had to swallow her pride and return. 'For how long can a married daughter stay respectfully at her parent's place?' she asks.

One after another, she bore five children in a span of ten years. She never took a single medicine or went to hospital for any of her pregnancies. The only rest was for a ritual of 40 days after the delivery when she was not beaten or asked to go to the fields.



However, there was not a moment's respite even in the late months of pregnancy. She was always rushing to work and never got time to feed her children properly. If they cried of hunger, she says: 'I told myself, aren't kids supposed to cry anyway?' The presence of children did nothing to sober her husband. With her face growing hard, Ashiya said: 'He didn't even talk to me and, worse, he didn't even look at the kids.'

One night, under the influence of alcohol, her husband stumbled upon an open bore well and drowned. She could rest for forty days again for the period of *iddat* (mourning). She believes that the government had sanctioned her Rs 10,000 under the NFBS



Ashiya Begum's children cried profusely for food.

after her husband's death, but as she could not give the Rs. 2,000 bribe to the *sarpanch*, he refused to hand over the money.

After 40 days, she went near the jungle to work in a Reddy's garden, just like her *abba* (father) had done. The Reddys allowed her to build a small hut and stay in the garden along with her children. They also gave her leftover food from their house. However, in a few weeks, her brother-in-law and his wife turned up, falsely accusing her of inappropriate behaviour. They fought with her, brought her hut down, threw her food and utensils, took all her money and pulled her out of the garden. When she pleaded with them to leave her alone at least for the sake of her children, they challenged her to bring up her kids just as she bore them, without their help. She looks back at her entire life since then as a vindication of her capacity to raise her children without their help.

For the next three days, she sat under a bush on the roadside. All she had were her children and they were crying profusely for food. Helpless, she had to ask for food from neighbouring houses 'like a beggar.' Soon, she had to make some difficult decisions in life. She put her daughters—aged six and four—as domestic helps in a *seth's kothi* in Hyderabad for Rs 25 per month. Her eldest son started working in roadside hotel for Rs 50 per month. She kept the youngest two children with herself and started working as a road construction labourer. When all the workers had lunch by the construction site, she tried to sleep under the bushes. When the hunger pangs grew, she filled her stomach with water then tied her saree tightly around her stomach and continued to work. At night if the children cried and she had nothing to feed them, she peeped out of her tent into the neighbours' utensils and borrowed a glass of *ganji* (water which is drained out of cooked rice) from them. Everybody got 5-6 spoonfuls of *ganji*, which helped them sleep. In the evenings, after the road construction work, she cooked in other people's houses. They gave her four rotis that the entire family relished them. 'If the poor have to live,' she says, 'they have to learn to beg for food.'



After the road construction work was over, she too went to Hyderabad and worked as a domestic help. After two years, she rented a room at Rs 250 per month and moved in there with all her children. She said that she decided to move out as she felt 'unsafe' at her employer's place. She explains that her employers were 'dangerous' people and their sons beat her up and exploited her just as her husband had done. If she complained to their mother, she sided with her sons and accused her of lying. As she spoke, she widened her eyes and stressed the words 'unsafe' and 'dangerous', and then asked: '*Aap dangerous ka matlab samajhte hain na?*' (You understand the meaning of dangerous, right?).

Ashiya Begum had rented a room, left her job in the *kothi* and was down with high fever. There was no money and therefore no food. Exhausted and desperately looking for support, she met a man. Refusing to name him, she only said that he was a 'man who sold vegetables' in Hyderabad and supported her tremendously.

He earned about Rs. 30-40 daily and gave her five rupees out of it every day. The rest of the money was for his family. Ashiya Begum smiled for the first time through the interview and said that he treated her much better than her husband and did not let her shed a tear. They had a daughter next year and after she was born, he shouldered the entire responsibility of the household. He paid for everything except for the room rent which was paid out of her children's earnings. Ashiya Begum could afford to stop working outside the home for the first time in her life.

This man's wife often confronted her but she never answered back. 'He was the first person in my life to support me, should I not have supported him then?' she asks. Now the family could afford *makkal* (fine rice of inferior quality) and have two meals a day. *Salan* to eat with rice could be begged from 'anywhere'. All the children called 'the man' *abba* (father) and treated him with respect.

Both of Ashiya's daughters were now too grown up to be left in *kothis* to work. So, they started working in a plastic factory. Unfortunately, while working in the factory, the younger daughter,

Mahmooda Begum, got her hands tangled in a machine and lost four fingers of her right hand. The owner paid her medical bills but no compensation. He assured the wailing mother that he would help her to get a government disability pension, but it never materialised.

Soon, she arranged the marriage of her elder daughter, Shenaz Begum. Shenaz, then 17 years old, was married to a man twice her age and a father of three children. She agreed to the match only because the groom was ready to marry without dowry. However, on the day of the wedding, he first complained that the marriage feast did not have mutton and then presented a long list of things to be given before he consented to the *nikah* (marriage). Ashiya Begum, frantic now, arranged for mutton and the rest of the demands (utensils, beddings, almirah, water tank, watch etc) were arranged for by her sons and neighbours.

Shenaz's fate was no different than her mother's. She too became a victim of her husband's alcoholism and domestic violence. After a nightmarish incident, when Shenaz's husband thrashed not only her, but also her brothers and mother, as he wanted to give away their infant son in adoption to his childless sister against Shenaz's wishes, the family rushed back to their village. While it was still dark, the neighbours pooled in money and helped the family to escape to Narayanpur, their village. Till date, Shenaz's husband has no knowledge of their whereabouts, and they are bringing up the child in fear that his father will one day find them all and take the child from them.

Getting Mehbooba, the younger daughter, married was a greater challenge as she was disabled after the incident in the factory. She too was married to a man much older than her, and a father of four children, in the absence of dowry demands. Shenaz's son is two years old now. The 'man who sells vegetables' is with his wife in Hyderabad. She claims that he hasn't forgotten her, but can't come to meet too often because of the distance.

Ashiya Begum has rebuilt her broken home and started



working as a daily wage labourer along with Shenaz. Her in-laws, after years of a broken relationship, have now started to invite her for functions and festivals. She has kept her resolve and all her children have survived without her stretching out her hand to her in-laws' family. It is her chance to turn them down now. Ashiya Begum is too proud to accept their invitations.

She has a four-month-old BPL ration card that gets her 20 kilograms of rice, one kilogram of sugar and two litres of kerosene oil. The ration shop opens twice a day but if they don't collect their share early in the month, the stock finishes. This month they didn't have enough money for the entire stock, so they couldn't collect any ration. She feels that the ration entitlement is very inadequate for her large family of six. It never lasts beyond ten days a month. Whenever they go to collect ration and have to stand in the queue, they miss the labour wage for the day. After the ration is over, they have to depend on the *kirana shop* for their needs. Sometimes they take ration on credit from the kirana shop and later return it in cash or through labour.

Ashiya had requested the sarpanch for a widow's pension many times but her efforts failed to materialise until recently when she bent down and touched the *patwari's* feet. The new *patwari* remembered her as the wife of a man who took him to school in his rickshaw when he was young, and so he wrote her name in the pensioners' list. She has now been getting pension for six months, and though irregular, it is much valued. She has a job card, but the work under NREGS has not yet started in the village.

The family skips celebrating small festivals and celebrates the important ones according to their financial situation. Her eldest son gets a new saree for his mother on Eid; while on other less important festivals, she washes the old ones and wears them. Sometimes she cries on festivals but makes sure no one is watching her. She has no jewellery and has never worn any form of metal. She recalls that her daughter had a thin silver anklet that she sold for peanuts when the family desperately needed money for food.

With two of her sons grown up, she naturally hoped for a better future. However, her youngest son met with a lorry accident, which led to the loss of his mental balance, and he has since wandered away. She complains that her second son always plays cricket and is squandering away time with other rowdy boys of the village. He comes home only in search of food and sleep and yells at his mother if there is a slight delay in serving him food. The eldest, her favourite one, earns Rs. 1000 a month but has ceased to shoulder family responsibilities. He is engaged and to-be-married soon, and is already talking of a division in the house, their only property. He is clear that he wants no responsibility of a sister-on-the-run and an ageing mother once he has his own family.

Refusing to resign, Ashiya Begum is taking further steps for an independent future. She has taken a loan of Rs. 6000 from The Cooperative Bank at a two per cent rate of interest to be paid weekly. Two separate loans of Rs 2000 have been taken from the Reddys of the village with three and four per cent interest rates. With this money, she has set up a small *kirana* shop just a month ago. They earn about Rs. 20-30 per day. Most of this money needs to be saved for the repayment of loans. However, Ashiya Begum continues to be hopeful. There is competition and to run a shop means sacrificing a day's wage labour.

With age, Ashiya Begum complains of chest pains and asthma. She has developed heart problems and cannot lift heavy weights which agricultural labour demands. Her health depends on the regular intake of tablets which are expensive and she cannot afford them more than a week in a month. She traces her present health problems to her husband who had made her body "hollow" by regular violence. Despite a never-say-die attitude Ashiya Begum asks: 'All that I can recall in my life has been the struggle to bring home food. It is true that I have lived my life. But is this the way life should be for anyone, struggling just to keep alive each day? Did you find any peace in my life?'



#### 4. Thirumatamma

At Police Thirumatamma's house, the door was unbolted and there was no one to answer our knock. A passerby suggested that we simply enter, as Thirumatamma's old ears would not hear us knocking from the gate. We entered, but just before we could step inside the main building of the house, a strict voice asked who we were, rather reproachfully. The house was dark and the air carried dampness. When our eyes got used to the darkness inside, we saw a frail woman in a tidy house. Police Thirumatamma is 90 years old and looks her age. Her body is wrinkled and her eyes are set deep in their sockets. From a child widow, Police Thirumatamma is now the oldest, the richest and the most revered woman in the village.

As we began talking, Thirumatamma gradually let her guard down. Her only condition in sharing her story with us was of complete confidentiality. Thirumatamma maintains total detachment from the village. Even from amongst family, despite old age, she lives with no one, and allows no one to live with her. This self-imposed exclusion has been her way of coping with an exclusionist society.

Thirumatamma was born into a rich Reddy family of the village. Her childhood was full of love, happiness and security. She was married in a prosperous Reddy family of the neighbouring village. She was 11 years old. There is not much she can recall of her married years, just that she was a carefree child and had to face no exploitation or cruelty, unlike many other young daughters-in-laws.

Her husband died after three years of their marriage, leaving Thirumatamma a child widow at 13. The last rites' ceremonies and the impact of the whole environment in the house due to an unexpected death bewildered her and she fainted in shock, trauma and fatigue. She went into a coma. When she was revived in a few weeks, she was sent back from her in-law's place to her maternal home. Immediately after her husband's death, she had attempted suicide thrice, in three different ways: drinking acid, consuming

poison and jumping into a well. But she survived all three attempts miraculously. Believing that God wanted her to survive, she then invested all her heart and soul in surviving in a world so hostile to a widow.

Thirumatamma planned and made conscious choices for her future. In the high caste Reddy families, where widow remarriage is not permissible, at the age of 13, she had many decades to live alone. She had a loving family but she refused to live on their support. She realised that financial security was her only key to independence. With initial investment by her brothers, she opened a small *kirana* shop and sold grains, toffees, biscuits, *bidi* and pouches of alcohol. All her earnings were collected and given as loans to needy villagers with a reasonable amount of interest. When enough money was loaned out, the next lot of money was saved to build a huge and spacious house.

Thirumatamma has lived alone in that house for 70 years. She learnt to depend only on herself for all her physical, financial and emotional needs. She earned and lived on her own and took nothing from her brothers except for initial guidance. Even the idea of dependence on anyone else is repulsive to her. Her dignified detachment, strength and courage have earned her respect in the village society.

There are times when she has been victimised for staying alone, without a family. Once, her house faced three thefts in quick succession. Money and jewellery were stolen. However, she absorbed the loss silently and made no complaint to the panchayat. She says she did not complain as she did not want to 'trouble' anyone. The village talked highly of her patience and forgiveness.

With age, Thirumatamma is facing physical deterioration. She is hard of hearing and cannot walk with ease. One of her ears has given way completely. But she is still adamant to preserve her independence. She cooks herself, cleans her house, washes clothes and fetches water. For her provisions and other needs, she goes weekly to the Vikarabad market, all by herself.



She is illiterate and depends mainly on her memory to remember her debtors and their amounts. With age, her memory is fading and she has problems in even recognizing faces. She can no longer walk through the village, going from house to house to collect the interest of the money she has loaned. She tried to keep a notebook with all the loan details filled in it by a trusted person in the village. But it is getting difficult to find trustworthy people in the village. Her *kirana* shop is closed as she cannot go to the market and replenish stock. She has already sold one acre of land that her parents gave her as her share of property.

In her younger days, she financed the education of two of her nephews. Both of them are settled and doing well in Hyderabad now. They've asked her to stay with them many times but she has been refusing them. She says: 'I did not stay with my in-laws, or with my brothers, so why should I stay with them? What if their wives object or ill-treat me in the future?'

Thirumatamma gets a pension of Rs 200 per month with which she buys clothes for herself. She has a BPL card which entitles her to four kilograms of rice and two litres of kerosene oil. As the rice is not enough to last her through the month, she makes *jowar rotis*. Her brothers offer her to stay with them but she is adamant. 'I have lived on my own and will die on my own,' she says.

As the problems have aggravated, she has sold her house, including a clause in the agreement that she be allowed to live there while she is alive; only after her death will the real transfer of ownership happen. She is horrified at the possibility of the buyer turning her out of the house before she dies. She says in a loud and strict voice that it is impossible to remove her from this house as long as she is alive. 'It is written in the agreement,' she reaffirms. The money which was raised by selling the house has been mostly spent. Her creditors are deliberately not repaying her money, eagerly hoping for her to die so that their loan is automatically waived.

Over the past decades, Thirumatamma never compromised on her standard of living. For every festival, she has cooked plenty

of food and invited the villagers for a feast. However, for herself, she has never eaten a grain from another person's house. However, she is forced to compromise now. Her controlled composure weakens as she talks about old age battles. 'I have never begged before, but I feel that the day when I will be compelled to do so is near. I always feel so hungry now; there is no full meal to eat,' she says. She continues: 'I can go to my sister's sons' place but I would not like to. I have done so much for them and the relationship is harmonious; by going there I don't want to ruin it, and now I have already refused them twice.' Her meals have reduced from three to two, and from full meals to half meals. She cannot eat rice both times, and has to depend on *jowar* for one meal. The *sitaphal* tree in her garden was available for children to eat its fruits for free; now she has to sell them at one rupee each. Sometimes, she feels too weak to cook, so she has to sleep hungry.

There are little symbols of prosperity and pride that Thirumatamma does not want to do away with. She likes to cook on LPG although it is costly. The garden in front of the house is well-maintained. Every Friday, some children from the village come to clean her house, which she anyway keeps very clean, and she gives them five to ten rupees each. When she collects her pension, she gives Rs 10 out of it to the person who distributes it.

### 5. Somaiah

Tarigopula Somaiah has been hungry for as long as he can remember. The youngest of four children of a Dalit family, he never had enough to eat. His father sold fuel wood and red soil<sup>8</sup> in the villages. Somaiah had five children, two sons and three daughters. However, each of the three daughters died as infants. He says they were victims of 'black magic.'

As the family expanded, their ability to fulfil even their basic

8 Red soil is used in the villages of Andhra Pradesh to wipe the floors and walls of the houses.



survival needs became severely restricted. One particular year, the village suffered famine, and the family migrated to Mumbai in search of work. In Mumbai, Somaiah did odd labour jobs and earned about three rupees per day. Survival in the city was difficult, and the high cost of living left them with no savings. Tired of city life and its struggles, the family decided to come back to the village after three years.

In the village, Somaiah worked hard on the three acres of land which he had inherited. He incurred a loan of Rs. 9000 for the marriages of both his sons. His younger son who was a member of a band that played in marriages, parties and functions, did not contribute his earnings to the household. This created constant quarrels and led to the division of the family.

At the time of division, the family had three quintals of *jowar* in store. Both the sons and parents got a quintal each as their share. Initially, the younger son kept the parents with him for their share of *jowar*. However, it finished in six months' time. As soon as the *jowar* got over, the son and daughter-in-law did not like to serve free meals to the old couple. So Somaiah and his wife were reminded each day about their responsibility to work and contribute financially to the household. Bruised by his son's callousness, Somaiah's says: 'So long as the *jowar* lasted, he gave us food. After it got over, he is saying ugly things to us.'

Despite putting in efforts which go far beyond his physical capabilities, Somaiah is the last choice for physical labour in the village. The only work available to the old couple is that of weeding. There too, other workers ill-treat and mock them. Most co-workers mimic them while others simply refuse to assist them in any way. Even the employer is unsure of their capacities and repeatedly asks them to be careful and not pluck out the useful plants. Somaiah privately admits that his eyesight has gone weak with age and that there is possibility of his pulling out the wrong plants. There is a white spot in his eyes, which hints at a cataract.

A male worker gets paid Rs 50 per day weeding. However,

Somaiah works with women because of his eyesight and gets paid Rs 25. He traces his physical weakness to a forced family planning operation. In the half-acre of land that the old couple got during the division of property, he had planted some corn. However, it was eaten by a wild boar. Thereafter, he planted *uar dal* but this too was destroyed due to lack of sufficient rains.

Both husband and wife together get eight to ten days of employment in a month. Presently, his wife does not work in the fields due to persistent health problems. This has put greater responsibility on him. Having never done it before, even now Somaiah cannot cook for himself: he only earns and procures ration at home. On the days his wife is too ill to cook, the couple sleeps hungry. Somaiah's wife has some jewellery weighing about two grams of gold. However, he does not allow himself to sell it. He says with tearful eyes: 'The day we cannot work, we will beg and eat but will not ask our sons, and after we die, I don't even know whether or not they will come to do our last rites.'

Somaiah's only aspiration each day is to find some *dal* to eat with rice. Most days, he asks for it from his neighbours, who, though they dilute it before giving, do not blatantly refuse to, like his sons do. Sometimes they cook *dal* in the house. A meagre amount of *dal* is boiled, grounded, and mixed with some tamarind juice and water to increase its quantity. The kitchen walls were darkened due to smoke and there was no ventilation. Somaiah admitted that he and his wife managed to have some food each day but not a day was blessed with a full meal.

The family celebrates only selective festivals. Buying new clothes, even annually, is unaffordable. In the summer months, when no agricultural work is available in the village, Somaiah goes to work as a security guard in the mango grove of a *seth*. From there, he gets an old set of clothes for himself and his wife and the couple survives with them through the year.

The couple has a BPL ration card which entitles them to eight kilograms of rice every month. It does not last for more than a



week, so they are forced to buy ration from the market. Somaiah's life is supported by a pension of Rs. 200 from the government every month. For four-and-a-half years, Somaiah religiously visited the *gram panchayat* office on the pension distribution day, month after month, and requested the *sarpanch* and the secretary to grant him an old-age pension. He even gave them some bottles of country liquor and *bidi* packets when asked; yet he was denied pension. Only recently, the newly elected *sarpanch* take pity on his plight and sanctioned the pension.

Somaiah has to stand in queues to collect both pension and ration because of which he misses the day at work. He has also been asking the *sarpanch* to issue him an *Antyodaya* card for 35 kilograms of rice each month but the *sarpanch* has been refusing his request. The card is only for the aged without sons, he says. Somaiah says that he has no hopes left from his sons. He says: 'They will never change, and what they have done to their parents is going to be their fate at the hands of their children.'

From sons he moves to the society. He accuses the village society of being unhelpful and says that the *kirana* shop owner doesn't even give him a packet of *bidi* worth two rupees on credit. Also, government representatives, functionaries in village and staff of government hospitals are unkind, he says. He has to go to the government hospital with his wife often, and there they make them wait in long queues without any consideration for their age. 'Even the attendant in the government hospital thinks he is a *sahib* and speaks most rudely. He asks me to stand straight in the queue and not move even the slightest. And then I have to move from one room to another with that low quality paper slip in hand,' says Somaiah. To avoid all these hassles, the couple has started going to a private doctor who gives just one injection for Rs 10 and makes their pain disappear for at least 15 days. Somaiah asks: 'If I have no food to eat, how will I get enough money for medicines?' However, if the doctor suggests a course of 15 days, he tries his best to have the medicine for 2-3 days.

## 6. Lakshamma

We first met Lakshamma as she was returning from the fields to her house at dusk. She refused to divulge anything about her struggle for survival, until we had seen her house. As she unlocked her room, she began to cry. Hers was a tiny one-room house, but it looked very spacious, as there were no household goods that could help occupy the space. The first thing she showed us was her husband's death certificate and then began to talk to us, taking time to glance at the certificate at every pause.

Midupu Lakshamma was married at 10 into a not-so-rich Reddy family. When her husband and his brother decided to live separately, they inherited equal shares of land and debt liability too. The land was five acres, and the debt that of Rs 8000. Lakshamma bore three children, two sons and a daughter. The daughter's marriage plunged them into a further debt of Rs 20,000. Of the two sons, one is a carpenter, the other a milkman. Both of them worked hard and repaid all the debts on the family. Their father was old and only managed a little work on the family land with the help of his sons. Life was never very comfortable, but it did not offer any major challenge either. Lakshamma became insecure after her sons were married. Soon after marriage, they separated from the parents and the property, too, was divided. The sons got two acres each, and the parents were left to fend for themselves with an acre of land.

The walls drawn in the house were not just physical, but transcended even to the basic spheres of life. Her husband was old and could not work on their share of land, while the sons neither supported monetarily, nor contributed in the fields. This was the time of greatest food insecurity for Lakshamma. After a relatively comfortable life, getting accustomed to low food intake was painful.

In addition to pangs of hunger, Lakshamma felt betrayed by her own sons. She says: 'I have two sons, they live happily but do not take care of us. We have a lot of problems in procuring food.'

Lakshamma is compelled to work as a casual labourer in



other people's fields and earn some cash for survival. It is shameful for a Reddy to work as an agricultural labour. So Lakshamma hides her face and sickle in her saree while going out for work. Work is available only occasionally and wages are abysmally low. For many days in the month, she and her husband live only on one meal a day, with only a cup of black tea sufficing for dinner. If there is no rice at home, which is usually the case, they consume *rotis* made of *javulu* (an inferior quality cereal).

To make matters worse, Lakshamma's husband had a paralytic attack. A total expense of Rs 40,000 was incurred on his treatment. Here again, the money was raised with the help of relatives as her sons turned blind to their needs. Despite treatment, her old and famished husband died a quiet death four years ago. Societal demands made her sons contribute some money for their father's last rites. As this was not enough, a large part of the expenses was raised from relatives and neighbours. Rs 20,000 had to be borrowed from the village *patel* to cover the expenses of the feast that continues for twelve days after a death.

The official at the Block Development Office (BDO) was given a bribe of Rs 100 but Lakshamma has received no money under the NFBS. Lakshamma feels it is the village *sarpanch* who has blocked her access to the benefit. However, after much hard work for three continuous years, regular visits to the BDO and bearing transport costs, she has been granted a pension since the last five months.

Lakshamma now cultivates her land with the help of a village youth. She cultivated *tuar dal* for the last four years and has repaid all her debts. However, last year was not very fortunate for her, when despite her hard work, the land produced only 25 kilograms of *jowar*. She earned only Rs 400 for the year. 'What would you eat if you knew you had only Rs 400 to last through a year?' Lakshamma asks us. This year again, the signs from the fields are not very positive. She realises that she needs better irrigation but has no savings to invest in it. Lakshamma has a BPL ration card on which she gets

four kilograms of rice. To make her rice last longer, she eats rice only for lunch. For dinner, she eats *jowar rotis*. In addition to substituting rice for *jowar*, she also reduces her intake to half for both meals.

Her daughter's son lives in Madanpally, a nearby village, and visits her sometimes to buy her some grains and household necessities. Apart from this, she has no support. Her grandchildren in the village (her son's children) do not visit or value her. Lakshamma neither has the means nor the will to celebrate festivals. Her sons cook delicacies but neither of them invite her. To escape seeing celebrations and merry-making during festivals, she goes far away into agricultural fields. She likes to spend the day alone, out of the village, trying not to feel lonely or anguished over her sons' behaviour. Similarly, she avoids going to functions, even when invited, as nobody respects an old widow, even when she is a guest. She visits the houses of only a handful of close and trusted relatives.

Lakshamma points at her wounded eye and mentions her weakening eyesight because of which she fell while collecting fuel wood. Sometimes she feels she has no energy even to breathe and has fainted thrice in the past week. The lack of energy and poverty prevents her from going for a medical check-up.

When faced with chronic hunger, Lakshamma thought of selling her share of the land and depositing the money in a bank. For an old widow, whose sons have absolved all responsibility towards her, and who does not have the means to cultivate her share of land, a monthly interest from the bank deposit, though paltry, would at least allow for survival. The sons, hopeful heirs of the land, did not like to see the land sold. The younger one beat her up for harming his future prospects. Towards the end of the ordeal, he threatened her: 'If you dare sell the land, I will kill you.' The elder son, a mute spectator till this moment, added mockingly: 'Kill her, brother. If she dies, we will together spend Rs 10,000 and do her last rites.' Months later, Lakshamma is still stunned by the



incident. She wipes the tears that well up in her eyes, and says: 'I don't want to live this life. I feel like committing suicide on a railway track.'

Towards the end of the interview, Lakshmamma loses her calm and cries vehemently. Hers is a small house with three rooms. After the division, each of the sons and she have a room each. Her greatest trauma is that she has to constantly hear her son's voices and see their faces, as they live in the same house. It would be easier if she didn't have to see them at all.

### 7. *Kompalli Antamma*

Life has taught Kompalli Antamma not to trust anyone easily. Even as we visited her house several times, she continued to be reluctant to speak to us. As soon as she saw us, she would busy herself in household chores. Finally, she discovered that one of our researchers was from her native village. Filled with childhood nostalgia, she instantly opened up to us.

Kompalli Antamma was married when she was 9 to a 30-year-old man in the same village. Over the next 15 years, she bore him nine children, eight sons and one daughter. Out of them, one boy died of chicken pox, two from jaundice and one from malaria; four sons and the daughter survived infancy. As the family had many mouths to feed, Antamma had to work as casual labour in the fields. She was paid three rupees per day. All the four sons were put to work as bonded labourers as soon as they reached the age of ten. They earned Rs 100 a year and this money was saved for the expense likely to be incurred for their marriages. At that time, the family got lunch from their respective employers. They collected all the food and ate it together as a family. This was their only meal through the day. Antamma's husband had become old and weak, and could not work. To cope with his own limitations and maintain his position as the head of the family, he consumed country liquor and battered Antamma each night.

When survival became difficult, the family migrated to

Mumbai. They all worked at a construction site. The wages were higher in the city, but so were the costs of living. The struggle for survival continued, the change was merely in its location, for 15 long years. In the sixteenth year, they got news that there were rains in the village. Antamma decided that it was time to return to the village and cultivate their own land. The family had four acres of land which had been lying barren for lack of irrigation. Moreover, her sons were of marriageable age and Antamma wanted to get daughters-in-law from her village.

In the village, her sons toiled day and night, and their hard work paid off in the fields. First, her daughter was married off and then the sons. The youngest son went to stay with his wife's family as a resident son-in-law. According to custom, it is only the first resident son-in-law who gets the property. Antamma's younger son was not the first son-in-law in his wife's family and so did not get any share in the family property. However, having contributed to the household and taken care of his wife's parents, he demanded an equal share of property from the elder son-in-law. The feud led to his murder, conspired and executed by the in-laws and the first son-in-law. Kompalli Antamma did not file any police complaint and told everyone that her son died of a stomach ache. The couple had no kids and the wife was remarried soon, so there was not much use complaining or claiming property. While narrating this, Antamma maintained her calm, yet we could see her face muscles harden and her eyelids drop. Meanwhile, their large family of three sons, their spouses and children was unmanageable in one small house and tiny feuds erupted every now and then. This led to separation into nuclear families.

Antamma's third son had migrated to Mumbai, leaving his wife and two sons behind. So initially when the division happened, the old couple (Antamma and her husband) stayed with his family. The son sent regular money orders to the mother for family needs. His wife was upset about the money orders being addressed to Antamma and not her. She was already insecure about her husband



staying in the city for long durations, and the money orders not being in her name made her further insecure. She felt that if the money order was in her name, it would somehow symbolise her right over her husband. She expressed her displeasure and the husband had to make a pacifying visit to the village. The parents and the son's family were further separated, and the son promised to send two separate money orders, one for his mother and another for the wife.

However, a money order in the wife's name did not do enough to save the relationship. Antamma's son found a partner to stay with him in Mumbai, and has moved on to a life beyond the village. Neither of the women receives money any more. We saw Antamma's eyes getting wet for the first time through the interview when she said that although her son is living, he is as good as dead. Antamma and her daughter-in-law now share an empathetic relationship. It is her daughter-in-law who works hard day and night and makes sure that her two sons continue with their education. The elder one is in class 12, younger in 10. They have never been put to work as bonded labourers.

Nine years ago, Kompalli Antamma's husband died a peaceful and natural death. Her son in Mumbai came for ten days and that too once the last rites were over. Just a week ago, the government has sanctioned a house to her under the Indira Awas Yojna. However, she feels least happy about it. Under the scheme, first the house has to be built up to a certain level, only then is the first instalment of money released. Similarly, more money is released by way of next three or four instalments depending on the stage of the house construction. Not many beneficiaries have enough money to finance the initial construction and then make trips to government offices to get their money released. Kompalli Antamma refuses to take money on credit to build the house to the initial level. Building a house would mean paying interest on borrowed money on the one hand, and bribes to government officials to sanction her instalments on the other. Also, it will require

supervising the construction, buying building material, employing and paying labourers. At her age, she has neither the will nor the strength to build a new house. We heard from one of her daughters-in-law that her sons are pressurising her to take on the construction of the house. They feel that after her death, it is going to be an asset to them.

From the land, Antamma has kept half an acre for herself and has divided the remaining 3.5 acres between her sons. Her share of land lies barren for want of irrigation and effort. At 70 years of age, Antamma is no longer capable of hard agricultural labour. For a living, she offers labour in other people's fields and does the light work of weeding or cleaning. She is paid Rs 25 a day. Old age and the seasonal nature of her work have made her livelihood insecure. Even in good months, she manages to find work only for 10-12 days. Summer months are particularly vulnerable, she explains. Antamma has a BPL ration card that gets her four kilograms of rice every month. It is not enough to last through the month. Her life is mainly dependent on a government pension which gets her Rs 200 per month.

She skips celebrating smaller festivals, while the more important ones like Diwali, Sakranti and Holi are celebrated alone, within limited means. Just increasing the quantity of rice or cooking a small amount of seasonal vegetables is how she treats herself on festivals. Her other two sons who live in the same village call her to eat with them on festivals but she turns down the offer. She says: 'If they loved me so much, they would not have separated from me, they would have kept me with them and taken care of me.' Further, she asserts: 'I will not eat one month with this son, next month with another and next month with the third. I refuse to eat on a rotational basis.'

She confessed that she is anxious about finding food each day. She thinks of soliciting in the neighbourhood but then drops the idea each day. She fears that if she begs, people will talk about her sons not taking care of her and probably ridicule her. No credit



is available to her from the village *kirana* shop. She is old and has no constant source of income, and thus the recovery of credit cannot be assured. So, day after day, in every meal, Kompalli Anatamma sprinkles some salt on her plain rice and gulps it down with water, with no *dal*, no vegetables. To cope with hunger, once she went to eat food in the school's mid-day meal programme. Though she was served, she felt terribly guilty about eating from the children's share of food, so she never went there again.

In her house, we find that her only worldly possessions are one plastic and one earthen pot, both of which look overused, and a makeshift arrangement of three stones in the name of a *chullha*. An empty sack of fertiliser has been made into a thin mat on which she sleeps. Life has taught Antamma not to expect or hope, so she immediately dismisses the prospect of a better future. 'I didn't have any happy times throughout my youth, what good time will I have now?' she mutters softly.

### 8. Sheikh Gaffar

Sheikh Gaffar, along with his wife, sons and daughters, sit in an abandoned cattle shed. The family had no food to eat, and no water to drink. A *fakir* by birth, Sheikh Gaffar refused to beg. He ate only what was voluntarily given to him. Added to this was the trauma of insult and injury that he had to unfairly go through in his own village. The family was in fear and stayed indoors to avoid being seen in public as Sheikh Gaffar had been accused of practicing black magic, following a property dispute with his brother. He had complained to the police and the entire village had turned hostile towards him. Fearing for life, Sheikh Gaffar had to give up his ancestral village and his property, and shift to Yerravally, a village in the same district.

The local Muslim community arranged for them to stay in a house that lay vacant as the family had migrated to Hyderabad. Sheikh Gaffar started from scratch. He started casual labour work and the family's food insecurity decreased. Soon, they arranged for

their eldest son's marriage. However, immediately after marriage, the son asked his parents to build him a separate house, expressing his desire to stay in a nuclear family. Sheikh Gaffar himself lived in a borrowed house; he had no means to fulfil his son's demand. The angry son migrated to Hyderabad with his wife, and kept no contact with his parents thereafter.

Shamim, their daughter, suffered a paralytic attack and half her body could not function. Citing her ill-health as a reason, her husband abandoned her, along with their infant daughter of four months. Sheikh Gaffar's younger son went to work in Nizamabad district. In just a matter of four days, he showed disturbed behaviour. Currently, he lives in a faraway mosque to recover from his mental disability. Sheikh Gaffar says, crossing his fingers, that his youngest daughter is happily married.

Sheikh Gaffar is old and exhausted. But he can afford no rest or retirement. He has a wife, a semi-paralysed daughter and a 10-year-old granddaughter as his dependents. Also, he has a loan to repay from his younger daughter's marriage. He works on an annual contract basis with the village *patel*, who is also his creditor. A significant part of his wages is appropriated against the loan. In the name of property, he has two goats, which bear about two kids a year. These are sold for Rs 600-800 each and contribute to the family's income.

Sheikh Gaffar belongs to a *fakir* community, one that is entitled to live by religious soliciting from people. But he does not like to solicit in Yerravally as it is not his ancestral village. He only takes what people give him without his asking. The Muslim community in the village offer Sheikh Gaffar food and clothes on their return from pilgrimages or after some auspicious occasion in the family, or on festivals like Ramzan or Bakri Eid. But this is irregular, uncertain and insufficient.

Sheikh Gaffar works to earn a daily wage. Work is not available everyday and from the little wage that he receives, half is deducted against what he had borrowed for his younger daughter's wedding.



From the little food that the family can manage, the old couple first serve their semi-paralysed daughter and their grand-daughter. Only after they have eaten, Sheikh Gaffar and his wife have a meagre meal from whatever is left. On a few days every month, the family



Sheikh Gaffar is old and exhausted.

has only *rawa* or paste made of tamarind to eat. In the lean months, the family survives on water for many a days. The *kirana* shop owner is always reluctant to give credit to the family. Sheikh Gaffar tells us that in the last 10 years, since they have settled in Yerravally, no new clothes have been worn by any member of the family, not even during weddings in the family. Neither have they ever cooked sweets in their house. On festivals, if a neighbour brings them *sewai*, it is only then that they get to eat it. Their granddaughter, about 10 years old now, has begun to understand the pressures in the family and has stopped asking for eatables or toys. If someday, the child takes a fancy to something and pursues it, her mother gives her a light slap, painfully raising her paralysed hand. The child then sobs herself to sleep.

Though there has been some social support, Sheikh Gaffar has not been accepted as a denizen of the village despite living there for over a decade now. Only after repeated applications and visits was he issued a ration card two months ago. It is a BPL card, which entitles him 16 kilograms of ration for four people, good enough to last only for 10-12 days. The ration dealer always gives a little less than the entitled amount. Sheikh Gaffar still has to fight to get his pension. Each time his application is rejected on the pretext that he does not belong to this village. His daughter Shamim is entitled to Rs 200 as pension, out of which Rs 100 is spent on auto fare for her daughter's school. Her daughter is now in class six and there is no high school in the village, so she has to go to another village to study. Despite problems and scarcities, the family is determined to educate the child.

Sheikh Gaffar does not trust the *sarpanch* of the village and has no political support. When he requested the now retired *sarpanch* to grant him a house under the Indira Awas Yojana, he flatly refused and even ridiculed him by saying that even if it is sanctioned, he will not be able to build it as he has no money and that he is too old. Sheikh Gaffar is aware of the government schemes but says he has no energy to file application after application, visit



government offices and then bribe the officials to get even the smallest of benefits. His only hope is that the family is sanctioned a house so that they have a rightful place to stay. Their present house is badly in need of repair.

Sheikh Gaffar says that never in his life has he felt as miserable and humiliated as when his own people accused him of something (black magic) he had not done, and they made him walk with his body covered with dust, torn clothes and painted face in the whole village. The problems that he faces today are a result of that particular incident, believes Sheikh Gaffar. By now, Sheikh Gaffar was crying with loud sobs and could only manage to say: 'I have nothing more to tell you about myself.' His semi-paralysed daughter, Shamim, sat next to us through the interview, knitting. She said nothing but kept shedding quiet tears.

### 9. *Bhimamma*

Bhimamma, a young Dalit widow with three children, has shown rare courage and resilience despite life's challenges. The first challenge she had to face was as a child bride, married to a bonded labourer. Her husband had borrowed money from a Reddy landlord and, in return, he had to work in his fields for a year for a paltry sum of Rs 500 and a meal a day. Lunch served by the master-employer was stale, and insufficient in quantity, so her husband usually came home to eat. She ate only the leftovers, which were never more than a few spoonfuls.

Once, at lunch time, she herself found worms crawling in the rice served by the Reddy family. Dismayed, she threw the food on the ground and asserted: 'Why are you serving food with worms in it?' Later in the evening, she persuaded her mother-in-law to speak to the Reddys about the food they served. Embarrassed, the Reddy family promised to serve better food. Though the quality did not improve substantially and her husband continued to be underpaid and underfed, there were no worms again in the food.

After a year, Bhimamma's husband was freed and the couple

migrated to Mumbai in search of livelihood. The wages were higher in the city and in just six months, they were able to save a small amount of cash. Bhimamma and her husband bought 20 grams of gold out of their savings. However, this gold became a constant source of anxiety. They lived in an unsafe slum area, in a makeshift arrangement. With no security, they did not want their limited asset to be stolen. Finally, they decided to return to the village. In the village, they found their house broken and, therefore, were forced to live with a helpful neighbour. The couple did agricultural labour and lived on daily wages.

Bhimamma's husband consumed country liquor on a daily basis. On one occasion, despite drinking his regular amount, he wanted another bottle. As it was late in the night and liquor was sold out in his village, he walked to a neighbouring village. In an alien village, while drinking with acquaintances, all of who were in a drunken daze, there was a dispute, which led to Bhimamma's husband being thrashed.

His back and neck were fractured, blood oozed out of his forehead and nose and he lay unattended on the road between two villages. A resident of his village found him and informed Bhimamma. He was taken to a hospital in Hyderabad where he lived the last month of his life. This was the most challenging time in Bhimamma's life. She stayed in hospital with her husband, and naturally, could not go to work. She was forced to fast for many days in the month and also had to borrow money on high rates of interest for her husband's treatment.

Bhimamma did not have enough time to mourn for her husband. In addition to credit for hospital expenses, she also had to borrow for his last rites' ceremonies. She had a loan of Rs 14,000 to repay to her relatives. Of the joint property, she was given 1.25 acres of land. Her share of the cash, i.e. Rs 23,000, was promised to be given to her when she repaid the loan. They refused to heed to her request to deduct the loan and give the rest of the money to her. Bhimamma had no alternative but to summon a *panchayat*



meeting on the issue. She won her case in the meeting, and finally, after deducting the loan, Rs 9000 were given to her.

Bhimamma could not continue to live at her neighbour's house after her husband's death, so she shifted to her mother's place in the same village. Despite problems and a financial crunch, she ensured that all her children—two sons and one daughter—attended school. At school they got regular mid-day meals and therefore, it added to the family food security. Bhimamma bought a small piece of land from the money that she got as her share of her husband's joint property. Fortunately, she was sanctioned a house under the Indira Awas Yojana. After the house was sanctioned, as an afterthought, the person who sold her the land demanded another 4000 rupees. He took her to be a vulnerable widow and therefore started threatening her. However, Bhimamma was confident that if there were to be a case in the *panchayat*, the decision would be in her favour. Thus, without giving in to threats, she has started the construction enthusiastically. Constructing a house has increased Bhimamma's problems manifold. Though she has been sanctioned the house, the first instalment of money has not come and she has taken credit to construct the house. She has to employ labour for construction and pay them daily wages. She also needs to supervise the construction.

Instead of helping, encouraging or appreciating her struggles, many people in the village ridicule her. As she travels to a nearby town often to buy construction material or to visit government offices, villagers look at her new found mobility with suspicion and often taunt her during conversations. Even credit is difficult to access. Bhimamma's anxiety is increasing with each passing day. She says: 'I have no money to buy clothes, books or even food for my children. I am living on credit and building my house on credit. The first instalment has been delayed beyond patience. Meanwhile, the credit that I had taken has doubled due to the interest due on it. Construction is going slow as I cannot employ many labourers due to financial problems. I am always anxious

about the construction, food and livelihood.'

During the interview, there was a loud noise at the door. The person from whom she had bought the house appeared at the doorstep, soaked in alcohol. He muttered abuses and threatened Bhimamma in front of the research team. 'Go wherever you want but I will squeeze money out of your purse,' he said to her. To this, Bhimamma turned her head, gave a silent, stern stare to the man and then slammed the door shut. She then continued the interview as if nothing had happened.

Presently, she stays with her mother, a sister and all her kids. When both sisters get ready in the morning to go to their respective work places—she to Athveli to supervise the construction of the house and her sister to sell vegetables in Vikarabad—people comment on them. Bhimamma cites an early morning taunt: 'Look, both the sisters are going out. Where do they go, when will they come back, who do they meet? No one knows. They come as late as 9 to 10 p.m.'

Even friends and relatives don't call them for functions and festivals as Bhimamma is considered unlucky for religious and pleasant occasions. She recalls the way festivals were celebrated during her husband's times. The family always had good food to eat. Now, even for a major festival like Sankranti, they had no celebrations. When the children cried looking at their neighbours' festivities, she could only afford to give them ten rupees to buy some sweets and cheer up.

Currently, Bhimamma is unable to work. She usually has to beg to keep the house running, as she is too scared to borrow any more money. Once, there was no food for three continuous days and the children were crying due to hunger. She had to beg for leftover stale food from a Muslim *kasai* (butcher). For many days, she said she had collected thrown away food from outside people's houses. Now, she keeps an earthen pot outside a Muslim family's house to collect whatever food they might throw away early in the morning.



Bhimamma is largely unaware of government schemes and feels she has no political support in the village. Even her relatives do not support her. She complains that the *sarpanch* did not give her any family benefits even after her husband's death. She has no job card and no widow pension. The *sarpanch* had promised her pension within three months of her husband's death but it has not come in six years. Bhimamma has an *Antyodaya* card from the days of her husband, and it fetches her 35 kilograms of rice, two kilograms of sugar and three litres of kerosene oil. She complains about the inadequacy of entitlement, although she manages with poor quality rice.

#### 10. Amina Begum

Amina Begum's husband spent all his earnings in buying country liquor and under its influence, regularly battered her. No member of her joint family treated Amina Begum with respect as she never had money to contribute to the household. Whatever grains she got from her parents during the time of her marriage finished in five months time, and thereafter, she ate the last and the least in the family. When the situation grew unbearable, she went to her parents' place. Her parents offered to arrange another marriage for their daughter, but Amina Begum was herself reluctant. A woman who remarries is never respected enough in society.

After a week, Amina Begum's husband successfully persuaded her to come with him to Hyderabad where they would live in a nuclear family and also promised to mend his ways. In Hyderabad, Amina Begum found herself in a new trap. Her husband did not change at all. She had never worked before in her life and, therefore, was unused to manual labour. In an alien city far from the village, with no social capital, she was more dependent on her husband than ever before. Her parents came to visit her and supplied her with grains but they too exhausted their resources after some months. There were times when there was no food and she had to just satisfy her hunger with a cup of black tea a day. She did not beg

as she did not know anyone in Hyderabad and therefore felt ashamed in asking.

After seven months of stay, her husband stopped paying room rent. Her parents paid that too. After some months, hopeless and exhausted, Amina Begum telephoned her parents to come and take her to the village with them. However, she was pregnant by then. Her husband only visited her occasionally at her parents' place and she refused to live with him again. In two years, they had a son and a daughter.

After a few years of separation, Amina Begum's husband persuaded her to come to Mumbai along with him. She went with him in the hope of starting life all over again. In Mumbai, her husband worked as a construction labourer and she did the job of collecting iron nails that fell on the ground during construction and put them in a box. She got a daily wage of Rs. 30 for this work. Her husband continued to be his old self. He also took away utensils or foodgrains from the house to be sold in return for cash for his liquor the day he found no work. Their house was run on Amina Begum's earnings, a meagre amount of Rs. 30 a day. The children always cried for want of food and care. Tired, Amina Begum came back to her parents' village once again. The husband followed her to Athveli (her parents' village), stole things from their house and sold them to raise money for liquor. He threatened not only her, but also her mother, when they confronted him.

It was a phase in life where food was available at her mother's place but Amina Begum did not eat due to anxiety and shame that her husband had brought to her. Even when she had tried her best to make her marriage work, society viewed her as a 'woman who had left her husband.' She had to face constant verbal abuse and ridicule. 'I really tried to live with my husband, but it was impossible for me. I was hungry, tired, lonely and depressed. Every time I tried to talk to him, he thrashed me. As long as I was with him, not once did I have a peaceful day,' says Amina Begum.

When her husband took away their two-year-old-child to be



sold in Hyderabad, Amina Begum was frantic. 'He is my son, I will sell him in Hyderabad; it is my wish,' she quoted him saying. She pleaded for help from the village *patel* who obliged and got her son back. When her infuriated husband came to take away the son again, the village community came to her rescue. The husband was let off with a warning to never enter the village again. It is difficult to say if Amina Begum felt more anxious or relieved or whether she felt protected or insulted by the community's action towards her husband.

Amina Begum's husband had sold everything she had in the house, clothes, utensils and grains. The villagers donated some money and helped Amina Begum start afresh. In a few months, she heard that her husband had met with an accident in Hyderabad. She visited him but all medical expenses and care was arranged by her in-laws. Three years ago, she received a phone call that her husband was found drunk and dead on a pavement in Hyderabad. Amina Begum greeted the news with mixed feelings. She got no family benefits after her husband's death. There was no post-mortem report and the Hyderabad Municipal Corporation cremated the unclaimed body.

Amina Begum learnt tailoring to earn a living. Her parents are old and weak and find no work opportunities now. Only occasionally does her mother find work and earns Rs. 30 as daily wages. She earns only a pittance through tailoring. During festive months, however, she manages to earn upto Rs. 120 per week, but on an average, she makes only about Rs. 50 per week. Her brother lives with his nuclear family and treats his parents and sister with indifference. She has strained relations with her in-laws, who blame, and sometimes taunt, Amina Begum. After the initial sympathy, she hasn't received much help from the village community.

Amina Begum has two rations cards (one is hers, and the other her parents'). She has an *Antyodaya* card and her parents have a BPL card. She receives a total of 43 kilograms of subsidised foodgrains. They have an acre of land on which Amina Begum

planted mango trees under a government rural development programme. The plantation was successful and she had 25 mango trees on her land. She hoped to earn good money from them in the summer season, but she found all of them uprooted one morning. She suspects her in-laws to be behind this. The village supervisor promised to get her Rs. 2500 if she got a family planning operation done. She adhered, and also paid Rs. 500 as bribe to ensure the money, but she has not received any money yet.

Her mother has been employed as a cook in the school's mid-day meal programme. Though it has been two months since she has been working, her salary has not yet come from the government. The family has two old people and a widow, but not one among the three gets any pension. The *sarpanch* denies them pension as they have an *Antyodaya* ration card. With no pension and no regular income, for many months, they have no money to buy ration (even at subsidised rates). Amina Begum has no job card under NREGS. She says she is not fully aware of the scheme, so she did not demand a card.

With a set of old parents and young children to care for, Amina Begum has no time to think about herself. The family has no regular source of income and can afford nothing but subsidised grains. There is no money to get clothes, toys or stationery for the children. Amina Begum still remembers an incident where the family had been invited for a wedding and her young daughter had no bangles to wear. All the other children had come wearing bangles and they innocently teased her for having come with bare hands. The daughter cried the whole night thereafter, until she was promised bangles as soon as possible.

Most serious are the health problems faced by her old parents. Recently, Amina Begum had to borrow Rs. 4000 for her father's treatment. Besides this, she had to mortgage the land. And she has no hopes of retrieving it in the near future. Her debt in the *kirana* shop has crossed Rs. 500 and the shopkeeper refuses to give any further credit. Her in-laws had many acres of land, of which they



sold some, but she has been given no land, no money.

Throughout the interview, Amina Begum kept glancing outside her door. Her face appeared pale and whenever she spoke of her in-laws, she did so in whispers. At the end of the session, she widened her eyes and said: 'Do not tell my brother and sister-in-law that I spoke to you.'

## ORISSA

Despite his fear of becoming destitute in old age and desperate efforts to avoid it, Arkhit lives a failed life today. There is no one around even to feed the old man. He keeps lying down most of the time in his secluded and crumbling house, often in darkness, and languishes in loneliness and hunger.

Arkhit belongs to a tribal community in Buromal village, Kaprakhhol block, Bolangir district. As a member of a tribal community which has developed ways to cope with famine, drought, hunger and poverty faced by the larger region since British rule, Arkhit learnt these lessons early in life. Arkhit possessed two acres of land not suitable for agriculture. His family had to rely solely on their daily manual labour and barely met their daily food needs.

Arkhit started working for food at the tender age of five. He never went to school. He took his first job as a cowherd to save his parents the burden of feeding him. He worked on alternate days and was provided with a single meal on days of work. Arkhit then could clearly understand their condition at home by comparing the meagre water rice he had on the days when he stayed home and the filling meal he had on his days of work. To survive, Arkhit learnt the art of laying traps for wild rats, a craft that proved quite useful when there was nothing in the house. At such times, Arkhit was proud to bring his catch home and the whole family had a meal.

At the age of ten, Arkhit started working on the farms and also started collecting forest products. Since then, as he grew older and stronger, his wages increased and he felt that his family was



winning the battle against hunger. However, the frequent drought and flood in this period never allowed the family to have savings. Arkhit got married to a girl from Hanupali village when he was 18. They had a son in a year, but the infant died within four days of his birth. The second tragedy struck when his wife also died four days after the death of the infant. Both mother and the infant were weak. Despite his best efforts, Arkhit could not feed them properly. However, the costs incurred in efforts to save the child and mother and during the pregnancy were substantial and pushed them into debt. While they were working hard to pay off the loan and its high rate of interest, Arkhit's mother also died after a year, leaving him and his father alone. It was a hard time for both son and father. Arkhit had taken on the burden of doing household chores like cooking, cleaning and washing after returning from day-long, heavy labour. It took another five years and few good agriculture and employment seasons for the father and son to come out of debt.

Arkhit was then married again to a girl from the same village. They lived together, struggling hard for the next six years. However, they were childless and this worried Arkhit and his wife. However, Arkhit's wife suddenly died due to some mysterious disease. The pain and sorrow that Arkhit felt could be gauged from the fact that he vowed he would never marry in the future. Arkhit was around 30 years old at this time.

Life for Arkhit and his father went back to the same old routine of grieving and labour. His father was getting old and could not do much work. The burden of work as well as that of managing the house fell entirely on Arkhit, who was emotionally too weak to do it all alone. The father was frequently ill. Now Arkhit not only had to think about food but also about his father's medical costs. He further had to spend most of the time in household chores and in nursing his sick father. He slowly became secluded from the village and spent most of the time in the house. When Arkhit was 45 years old, his father died of prolonged sickness, leaving Arkhit all

alone. After repaying debts incurred during his father's funeral, Arkhit did not have many liabilities: he only had to worry about himself.

However, he was terribly lonely. The thought of old age and a failing body made him feel very sad. His father had been his constant companion. His loss created a major vacuum in his life. Despite advice from relatives, Arkhit did not marry again. The death of his two wives had badly shaken him. He was scared of getting married. Now all alone, Arkhit had no one to even talk to. He had already secluded himself from the rest of village when his father was sick and needed regular care. Now he avoided thinking about the past and silently engaged himself in one or the other work in a routine way without any purpose. He felt that there was no reason for his existence, and if anything happened to him, there would be no one to mourn.

He had to work in order to eat and survive. So in the morning, once the household chores were completed, Arkhit would go out and do casual work so that he could earn some money. Eventually, Arkhit lost all interest in life; he stopped cooking in the morning and ate whatever was left from the night before. Many days he would go without food and eat only when someone gave him something to eat.

Arkhit, even though living a life of a vagabond, realised he could not go on for much long. He decided to adopt his sister-in-law's son Narsingh. The child had no father, and he and his mother were facing economic hardship. Further, Arkhit owned two acres of land: he needed an heir for it or else other people would occupy it. The proposal was good for both of them, thus Narsingh shifted into Arkhit's house and they both grew fond of each other. Narsingh also provided the impetus which was needed in Arkhit's life, Arkhit had somebody to talk to and share his life with. Both of them worked very hard on their own land and also did casual labour to ward off hunger. At times, when nothing was available in the house to eat, both of them would go together in the forest and collect *tendu* leaves,



*mahul* and *charsul* for making ropes, through which they were able to earn some money.

Narsingh was married to a girl from Hanupalli village, Sumatee, who also started living with them. After a long time, Arkhit found happiness and was a content man. Sumatee gave birth to one daughter and one son. This was also the period when the hunger situation in the house had become critical. The whole region was facing severe drought. At times, the situation in the house became so critical that they had to borrow from shopkeepers and other people. Added to this, Sumatee could not work due to pregnancy and lactation, and her withdrawal from work meant loss of income and more expenses.

Left with no alternative and increasing debt, Narsingh did what others in the region were doing to cope: he also migrated for work. He was able to repay the debt, but Arkhit was once again left all alone. Narsingh now migrates every year with his family for a period of six months. Arkhit lives all alone those six months. It was not very clear whether Narsingh actually supported him or not. Arkhit did say that before going, Narsingh gave him Rs 100 and five kilograms of rice. He gets an old age pension of Rs 200 which he says is not sufficient for him. He owns two pairs of *dhotis* bought two years ago, now in tatters. Life for Arkhit has come full circle: he is all alone again. Since there is nothing much to do in the house and also because of his failing vision, Arkhit prepares his food early in the day and eats it alone.

## 2. Champo and Minzi Boriha

At the time of their marriage, Champo, Minzi's husband, was a *halia*. He worked there for five years and got 7-8 *addas* of paddy per month and was given food in the owner's house. Both husband and wife sold their respective pieces of land in their native village Khudipal, and came to this village 20 years ago. Champo's father had four acres of land which was sold for Rs 6000 and the money was divided amongst six brothers. Champo had Rs 1000 with him,

and with his wife and their two sons, he came to the village and purchased a small plot with a house in it.

They had six children, out of which three died in infancy. One son died when he was 11 years old. The eldest son, soon after marrying a girl in the village, separated from his parents and siblings. He went to live in his wife's parents' house. However, a few years after the marriage, his wife left him along with a girl child. His old parents then had him remarried by selling their goat. However, the second wife died after a year of the marriage. Then the son married for the third time, to a Dalit woman. The parents did not want to keep in touch with their son now.

Also, the younger son had built another house nearby after his marriage. He had four sons but all of them died in infancy. With poverty and tension over the death of children, there was constant fighting between the husband and wife, and one day his wife left him. Thereafter, the son lived alone in depression for some years, and he left them a few months ago, without saying anything. But he remembered to give them Rs 200 before he left.

Champo and Minzi worked hard as agricultural labourers when they were young, till disability struck them. First, Champo broke his leg when he was working in the fields. He slipped from a tree while doing some work. When his leg broke, his second son's marriage was about to take place. They were already in debt and nobody was willing to give them another loan. He could only get traditional treatment and endured the pain for a year during which he could not get up and walk. Minzi had to take full responsibility for running the house during this time. She would take up all kinds of agricultural work, cleaning cowsheds, separating rice from paddy, collecting forest products, etc., and would also do household work and take care of her ailing husband. She did not complain much about the hard work. However, before her husband could recover fully, she slipped in the house on a rainy day and broke her hand.

She showed her dislocated hand and said she still could not do any work with it. At the time when her hand was broken, there



was little that her husband could do as he himself was barely able to walk then. Their sons helped by bringing a traditional healer and helped them for few days. But it was understood that they would not be able to do this for very long. So one day, Champo took his bag, went limping to the distant villages of Bhanpur and Dhandamunda, and begged for rice and money. He continues to beg as now he has learnt to live with the shame associated with begging.

Minzi took a year to recover, after applying tree bark every day, but she could never use her hand for hard work. Even now, she is not able to sweep the floor with it. Even for fetching water, she has to use a pot which is half the size of a normal pot and has to make several trips to get sufficient water.

When Champo and Minzi were able-bodied, they used to work and earn around Rs. 30 each day that they got work. Now the only stable work which both the husband and wife do is cleaning cowsheds. They clean cowsheds in seven houses and get Rs. 650 annually as remuneration. Minzi is fed up of the work. She also collects firewood and separates rice from paddy for others. Their main support now is an old age pension, and whatever Champo gets from begging. But Champo cannot go begging every day as the travel gives him a terrible pain in his legs.

For many days, their staple food remains *basi* (rice water cooked one day before) and *bhaji* (green leaves from the forest). They also manage to get potatoes, onions and dry fish on some days. They get to eat *dal* only once every few days. For last one month, they did not have any *dal* at all. Even with this limited consumption, two meals a day are not affordable for them. 'Though we have a son who is married to a Dalit girl, we cannot get cooked food from them as the community will outcaste us. However, the Dalit daughter-in-law gives us raw rice and money,' says Minzi. Both the husband and wife cook food and share responsibility. However, it is Minzi who takes more responsibility when it comes to dealing with the outside world. It is she who manages loans from shops. When

we asked whether her sons objected to their begging, she replied: 'If sons have a reservation, what can we do? Shall we die of hunger?'

### 3. Indradeep

Indradeep tells us that the government had promised him a house under the Indira Awas Yojna, but after the foundation was laid and the walls were built, when Indradeep actually started thinking he would live in a 'real house', work was stopped all of a sudden. He is not very clear why it was stopped. Four years have passed but hope still lingers that someday the house will be made. Indradeep and his wife would not qualify as old people without caregivers as they have a son and daughter-in-law who send them money and also stay with them for a short period of time in the year. The day we went to meet Indradeep, his son Sandhu and daughter-in-law were in the process of leaving for Andhra Pradesh; their short stay at home was over.

For Indradeep, life, from the time he can remember, has been defined in terms of the next meal and warding off hunger. Remembering his past, Indradeep tells us that like other Dalits of his village, they were completely dependent on the higher castes who were the landowners. One landowner (who later became *sarpanch*) asked the Dalit families to vacate the land on which they were living. With no option left, Indradeep's parents cleared the nearby forest and made a hut for living. Gradually, other Dalit families who had been similarly displaced followed suit and, later, the government gave them *patta* of that land. Clearly, displacement was an important issue for Indradeep as he started narrating his life from there on. He told us that his parents used to graze the villagers' goats, and since they did not have any land, they were dependent on daily earning for their food.

His mother used to take an earthen vessel with her when she went to graze the goats. While coming back, some families used to put food in the pot, and this food was then brought home and shared by the whole family. Apart from this, Indradeep's father used



to get 1.5 quintals of paddy on an annual basis for grazing goats. This was precious for the whole family as it was the only food that was available during the times when his mother was not able to bring back enough food or was not able to go to work.

Hunger always haunted the whole family, because food was never enough. However, droughts were the worst time as the impact was felt by the landowners and other families. The consequence was that their wages (food that was given to them) shrank. In those times, Indradeep's father used to collect various kinds of forest products and sell them in the nearby town. Still on many days, the whole family used to sleep on empty stomachs. Indradeep says that they survived due to the forest from where they used to forage for anything that was edible: things that only poor people ate like *kuddo* (a weed that is boiled and then drunk), and seeds of bamboo flowers. Indradeep strongly disliked the taste of it, but still ate it since there was no other option.

According to Indradeep, once the two brothers grew up, the problem was solved to an extent as they could work as bonded labour. Indradeep was five years old, and the work allocated to him was that of grazing goats and bullocks. He used to get food two times a day, and 12 kilograms of paddy annually. Life went on the same pattern till he was 21, except that now he had become a *halia* (a bonded labourer who is older), and so now the work given to him was that of an adult.

Indradeep got married when he was 21, but his wife could not cope with the prevailing chronic hunger as she came from a family that had land. She left him and went to stay with her parents. However, later she came back and with both of them working, the situation improved a little. Soon the wife got pregnant and ceased to work. To cope with the food demands of his pregnant wife, he took small loans. As time passed, his wife gave birth to one daughter and two sons. But out of the three children, only one son survived. Indradeep was determined to provide Sandhu (his son) with a better life and so he sent him to school. Their financial situation had

improved a little as his wife had again started working. When Sandhu was in class seven, Indradeep was diagnosed with tuberculosis. This was a major shock to the family as not only did the disease devour all their savings but also their dream of educating Sandhu.



The food in Indradeep's house is frugal.



Sandhu realised that the burden of keeping his family hunger-free depended on him. While Indradeep was in hospital, Sandhu left school and started working in the village. He came into contact with people who used to migrate to the city for work. He too left with them to work in brick kilns at the age of 14. The contractor gave him 900 rupees in advance. This pattern went on for years and slowly the family was able to come out of debt. But even then, Sandhu had to migrate every year as there were limited opportunities available in the village. He had no other option as Indradeep's treatment was continuing and both parents were dependent on him. Now Sandhu and his wife together get an advance of 8000, and before leaving for Andhra Pradesh each time, he gives his parents 500 rupees and has also released his mother's jewellery from mortgage.

Despite his son's earnings, the food in Indradeep's house is frugal. They mostly eat rice and burnt tomatoes. Occasionally, they eat *dal*. Indradeep says they have to save money for medical expenses and also live within what their son sends them. They try to evade medical treatment as much as possible. Indradeep's greatest fear at present is not food, but his house. He worries about what will happen if the roof of his house collapses when his son is not around.

#### 4. Laibani Majhi

Laibani Majhi is a single woman with two children; she has been abandoned by her husband due to physical disability, goitre, a condition that could have easily been rectified.

Laibani was not born in poverty. Her father had 12 acres of land and cattle, and also two bonded labourers and one servant working for him. The family was also small: it comprised of Laibani, her brother and a sister, and their parents. Laibani says that they always had enough paddy that would last for the whole year and thus they were never anxious about food. The only work she and her sister were supposed to do was to help their mother in household work.

Laibani's first encounter with hunger occurred when she was seven years old and there was a severe drought in which the whole village suffered. For the first year, the situation was under control for Laibani's family as they had enough grains to last the year. However, the drought continued beyond that year and they soon had nothing to eat. The condition was so bad during those times that even people who were owned land had to resort to mortgaging and selling land, cattle and other assets. But the situation was worse as no one had the means to buy it, even the shopkeepers and money lenders did not have enough money to take mortgaged items. As Laibani says: 'It was at this time that my mother went to the forest with my father and I began to do household work single-handedly for the first time.' After some time, Laibani also started going with her mother to the forest. 'In the jungle we collected *mahua*, *kendu*, *char*, *kardi*, and various roots and tubers. It was the forest that kept us alive,' she says.

The major workload had now shifted to Laibani's mother as she worked in the house and also went to the jungle. Her father accompanied her mother a few times, but since women had more knowledge about what could be edible and what poisonous, it was mostly her mother who went to the forest. While accompanying her mother, Laibani also gained knowledge about edible products from the forest. Like most households, it was the mother who sacrificed food for the sake of the children and husband. At times, it was only the children who ate, the parents slept hungry.

The drought lasted for five years. During this time, Laibani and her sister learnt how to cook and what to eat when nothing was available. Most importantly, Laibani 'learnt to make sacrifices for others.' It was also the time when her mother gave birth to her brother, so the burden of work shifted to Laibani, the eldest child in the family. She had to take care of her mother as well as the infant brother.

It was then time for Laibani to get married. At 20, Laibani got married to Girdhari Majhi and she shifted with him to village Thundi



Bahal. Her in-laws' family comprised eight members, out of which four went to work every day. Laibani stayed back home with her mother-in-law and took care of all the household chores. The mother-in-law looked after the two kid brothers-in-law and one sister-in-law.

For a few days, everything went smoothly. Even though her mother-in-law did not help her in household chores, Laibani had no problems because she was used to managing a house on her own. But soon things started changing. Laibani was given leftover food which was not at all sufficient for her. Laibani says that due to the insufficient and poor quality of food that was given to her, she developed goitre. At first, Girdhari, her husband, a seasonal worker, got her treated, but since he worked only for six months a year, the money for treatment became a problem. Whatever Girdhari had saved went into her treatment. This was not appreciated by other members of the family. Though the goitre improved, her in-laws and her husband started taunting her. Succumbing to pressure and mental harassment, Laibani and Girdhari shifted to Laibani's maternal home.

Once Laibani's was back at her parents' home, she realised that her status within the household had changed. Her parents took care of her, and she says without their help she would not have survived. But then Laibani and her husband had to earn their own living: in her parents' house she cooked food, fetched water and even cleaned the cowshed. Her husband, on his part, worked in the fields. After two years, Laibani gave birth to her eldest son. Two years after his birth, Laibani's goitre started growing again. She was so caught with trying to raise her family that this time she did not pay much attention to it. However, in the next five years, it grew to an alarming proportion and she had to sell her gold earrings to get it treated. She did not recover completely even after the treatment. Laibani stopped the medical treatment and went to the village quack instead; surprisingly she got better with his treatment. After one year, Laibani again became pregnant. While she was

pregnant with her second child, her husband had fallen in love with another woman and he went away with her leaving Laibani alone.

Now she was at the mercy of her parents who were very angry with Girdhari. They were also upset that their daughter was now without a 'man.' Laibani herself admits that 'it was the worst phase of my life, there was nothing except darkness.' She had stopped paying any attention to herself and had become very weak, but when the baby was born—this time a girl child—Laibani realised she had to make an effort for her children. She says: 'I have emerged as a stronger woman.' Further, she adds, "I am alone with two children, I never think of my husband now. I don't think of him because I feel if I think I will become weak again. However, when my son or my neighbours ask about him, I get very angry. I can never forgive him."

Laibani's hopes and future aspirations are now for her children; she does not hope that things will improve for her anymore. Bringing up two children has meant that she has to go out to other people's house to work. The same Laibani whose father had three servants in the house now has to look for work in the same village. It is humiliating for her but she does not think about it much as her children have to be brought up. Laibani's daughter is small and does not want to leave her mother, so Laibani takes her along when she goes for work.

Clearly, family support is diminishing for Laibani. She admits in a matter of fact voice that her brother is married and has a family to look after and he cannot afford to feed three more mouths. So she works in their house as well as in a relative's house. Mostly, she does errands like cleaning the cowshed, fetching water for them and bringing rice and grocery from the *kirana* shop.

Laibani does not beg but she says 'sometimes rich people in the village have mercy on me and they give me five or ten rupees, grains, rice or vegetables with which I manage my daily living.' She saves the money as her children are quite young and do not



understand her situation well. At times, when they see other children eating biscuits or toffees, they ask for the same. 'If I have some money or rice, then I give them something to eat; if not I try to explain the situation to them by promising something for the near future. Sometimes my parents give them some money to eat biscuits and chocolates,' she says.

Laibani has an *Annapoorna* card, but the ten kilograms of rice that she gets is insufficient for her family of three: it merely lasts for ten days. 'We use it for the last ten days of the month. Once the rice is finished, I do petty errands for others and work at my parents' home and live on whatever I get', she says. Laibani's parents, though old, try to support her by giving her a piece of cloth and a little money now and then.

There are days when nothing is available in the house. At such times, *letha* (tamarind paste) is eaten. Laibani told us that she is quite food secure in the rainy season, and it is the only time her children are able to get nutritious food. At present, the situation in the household is precarious as there is nothing to eat, nor any bronze utensils to mortgage, and every meal is entirely dependent on what she can earn or what her parents can give her. She does have a silver chain which she is ready to sell but only when circumstances are beyond her control. The reason she cites is that it is precious to her because it was given to her in her marriage and it is the only tangible piece of memory that she steadily holds on to. Her daughter falls sick very often. Till now, she has managed to avoid selling it by reverting to traditional healing systems, like applying oil all over her daughter when she has fever.

Celebration of any festival depends on the mercy of her parents. The meaning of festivals for Laibani and her children is limited to good food and not the rituals and festivities that surround it. At times, Laibani is invited to attend functions, but she herself does not prefer to go and sends her son instead. She does not say much about why she does not prefer to attend functions.

Since she cannot afford breakfast, her son and daughter get

*mudhi* (cheap snacks) and tea at their grandfather's place and all three of them share it. At times, her daughter gets vegetables from her uncle's place. But then, Laibani says, 'nobody likes to give every day.' While talking about her son's education, Laibani says it is her brother who is supporting his education by paying the school fees which are unaffordable for her. But she also knows deep inside that this informal arrangement cannot work for long as now her brother has his own family to look after. She could herself see that gradually the support had started decreasing, and her income does not allow her to think of getting her son educated on her own. Further, she says it is an exercise not worth investing so much money in as now he can read and write and that is what is required minimally. Also, the other factor is that her son has grown up and works in the cotton fields. Continuing his education would deprive her of the precious little income that comes through him. But still hope lingers on and she says she may send her son to a government boarding



Laibani's immediate concern is food.



school in Turla (nearby town) where she does not have to pay any fees. Laibani is clear that she will send her daughter to school, but once she learns to read and write, that will be the end of her education.

Laibani's immediate concern is food and also how to survive the winter. They do not have warm clothes and the only solution is to light a bonfire and sleep near it. Though it gives the much required warmth, their clothes get burnt all the time. Anxiousness about the future is reflected in Laibani's voice: 'Right now, I am 35 years old. I can work, clean cowsheds in the morning, then clean my house, fetch water, cook.' She does not say anything beyond this but what is unspoken is understood: what will happen when she grows old?

She continued: 'In every person's life, happiness and sorrow come like two companions. They both came in my life too. However, I would like to think that in my future life I will have no sorrows. Because my children will grow up soon and we will together earn lots of money. We can then live happily. God helps everyone. He will also take care of us; he has given me enough sorrows, so he would not let me stay in this condition for long.'

### 5. Malti Bariha

Malti Bariha is a 75 year-old widow who is always preoccupied with her broken house. Her biggest fear is that one day the roof might collapse and because of this, she does not sleep in her own house but in her neighbour's veranda. Malti has relatives in the same village and her two daughters also stay in the same village. Her son lives in the city. What was obvious from Malti's condition was that the linkages with her children have either broken or are very fragile.

Though Malti has experienced and lived poverty and hunger from her childhood, she never imagined her last days would be spent in loneliness in spite of having three children. She knew that her daughters would not be the ones to take care of her as they would be married off, but she did not foresee that her husband

would die before her and that her only son, on whom the hopes and aspiration of both Malti and her husband depended, would leave them, making her now fend for herself.

Malti told us she was born in a poor family and had two brothers. They did not have any land of their own. To sustain the family, her father worked as a daily wage labourer. Even after working for the entire day, her father was not able to earn enough to feed the whole family. When her father brought paddy home, her mother used to husk and rake the rice out of it and only then food was cooked in the house. Most days, the rice was not enough for the whole family, so the family was heavily dependent on the forest for food products like edible grasses. Like any other poor family in the village, the water of the rice cooked in the night was stored and used as breakfast. The situation eased a little when her brothers grew up and started going to work as bonded labourers and her mother also worked whenever work was available. Malti had also started accompanying her mother to the fields. So with every member in the family working, food insecurity receded and the family could eat at least one proper meal a day.

At 14, Malti was married to Murali Bariha, who had a small piece of land in his village, though he also did *halia* work in Malti's village. After her marriage, Malti went to Murali's village, which was nearby. Initially, Malti did not go to work but after the birth of her children, she started working in the field as the size of the family had increased and Murali's earnings were not enough to support the entire family. The economic condition of the house was always precarious. Malti does not remember that she ever took her children to a doctor when they were ill. The maximum that they could afford was taking them to a traditional healer. Malti and Murali could only afford to educate their son, Chakra, till class three. Both the daughters did not go to school as 'there was simply no scope for it.'

In the meantime, Malti's father-in-law died. Since he lived at his own in-laws' house, they thought they should go back to Murali's ancestral place and claim the piece of land which belonged to them



Keeping this in mind, Malti and Murali with their three children came to Ankamara village. Once they reached Ankamara, Murali's uncles refused to part with his father's share of the property. With no option left, Malti and Murali bought a piece of land and constructed a hut.

Murali and Malti started working as bonded labourers again, and now their son Charka, too, joined them. In spite all three working, food was still difficult to come: so going to the forest became an essential routine for Malti and her daughters, where they collected *tendu*, *kardi* and wild mushrooms and this compensated for the lack of food in the house.

In the meantime, Malti and Murali got both their daughters and son married in the village itself. For two years, the son and the daughter-in-law stayed with them, but later left to work in a saw mill in search of better prospects. At times, Charka used to send some money, but gradually not only did the money stop coming, his visits became sporadic.

Ten years ago Murali passed away, leaving Malti all alone. Her son sometimes comes to visit her and gives her some money, but his visits are infrequent and so is the money. After a long struggle, Malti was able to get a widow's pension in 2005 (nine years after her husband's death). She also has a BPL card but she says even for BPL ration, one needs money and she does not have that.

Forest products had always been a source of livelihood for her, but now she cannot traverse the distance due to old age. Even small tasks such as bringing water have become difficult for her now; she cannot even collect firewood for her cooking. The result of this is that her food is half-raw and inedible most of the time. Almost every day, she cooks rice and burns potato or a brinjal to eat with it. Malti tells us that she never cooks curry as it requires expensive spices. If she really feels like it, she asks her neighbours for some.

The loneliness and anxiety about daily food is taking its toll on her, so much so that despite having an uncomfortable relationship

with her daughter-in-law, she requested them to stay back in the village or at least mend the house so she could sleep inside. At present, Malti sleeps in the verandah of her daughter's father-in-law's house. Though they have not asked her to vacate the place, her own daughter is telling her repeatedly to find some other place to sleep. The reason for it, according to Malti, is that her daughter wants to construct a house for herself at the same place. Whenever Malti gets her widow's pension, her daughter asks for money and at times takes the BPL quota rice. The widow's pension which is merely an aid for her survival has become an excuse for her son and daughters not to help her. Whenever she asks for help, they tell her to use her own money that she gets from pension, but Malti says that the pension money is not enough as she has to buy rice from it and also manage other expenses.

## 6. Nirvani Kumhar

Nirvani is a 40-year-old woman who has an ailing husband who is 60 years of age, and three children. Nirvani had another daughter who died a few years ago. Nirvani looks older than her age as she has lived with hunger from childhood. She says even as a child, the immediate question was what to eat and how to get it. Nirvani does not remember her parents as they died long before memories started taking roots in her mind. She was brought up by her three brothers, of whom one was already married and worked as a bonded labour. The other two brothers went to school but also worked after coming back. For Nirvani, going to school was not an option and she does not grudge it: her role in the household was limited to doing household chores and helping her sister-in-law.

At the tender age of twelve, Nirvani was married to a man who was twenty years older than her. The marriage took place strictly for utilitarian reasons. Her brothers wanted to do away with the responsibility of supporting her as soon as possible and her husband's family needed somebody to do the household chores. When she came to her in-laws' house, she came to know that her mother-in-



law had run away with another man and she was supposed to take care of her father-in-law and husband, who worked as labourers. She was relieved to know that she was only supposed to take care of the household and not work as a labourer. Proudly, Nirvani says her husband was very hard-working and earned enough to support her.

Nirvani soon became pregnant and over a period of six years, gave birth to four children, three daughters and one son. Life for Nirvani went on smoothly for a few years. Her husband supported the whole family, and they also had one acre of land which provided them food security for two to three months a year. Nirvani wanted all her children to go to school. Her husband was getting old and



Nirvani was married at 12 years of age and gave birth to four children in the next few years.

his earning capacity was decreasing. Nirvani's husband by now had become weak and frail, and could not go to work every day. Her eldest daughter tried to work in the village but the earnings were so meagre that it was difficult to survive on them.

From here on, life started taking a turn for the worse. Her husband's health deteriorated and he was diagnosed with a heart problem. He required rest and medical care. For a few months, Nirvani tried to keep up with the medical expenses, first by selling the one acre of land that they had and by sending her daughter to work in the village, but still the treatment cost was so high that the family could not afford it.

Sensing the condition of the family, her two daughters decided to migrate and work in brick kilns in Andhra Pradesh. Nirvani says that sending her young daughters unattended was not a choice but necessity. 'If my situation was not bad, would I send my young daughters like this? I could not sleep at night after sending my daughters to unknown places. But what else could I do except cry?' she asks. Though her husband needed prolonged treatment, once he started feeling better, he decided to migrate with his daughters to work in the brick kilns. They were able to save enough to get the elder daughter married. This time the whole family migrated leaving their son with a relative so that his studies would not be disturbed. However, when they returned, they found their son in a fragile and weak condition. He had become very sick and they had to spend a lot of money on his health. Sensing that they could not leave their son with the relatives any longer, they migrated as a whole family.

However, a year ago, the younger daughter who was studying in class six died all of a sudden. The death of her daughter not only rendered Nirvani emotionally shattered and depressed but also started impacting her physically. Nirvani frequently suffers from fever and sleepless nights. Her husband's health worsened once again and he could not even move from his bed. Not only were their earnings spent for his treatment, they also had to sell their last remaining asset, the bullocks. As soon as he was a little better,



he migrated to the city with the daughter and the son. Though he could not work now, he was able to take care of the son and the daughter. The main burden of feeding the family lies on the daughter as the son is too young and gets meagre wages. It is the daughter who carries bricks and earns enough for the family to be able to survive.

Nirvani stays all alone in the village and takes care of the goats. She also takes up daily wage work when it is available in the village. Despite all the members of her family working in some way or the other, it is still difficult to make both ends meet. Most of the time, Nirvani survives on broken rice and *mahua*. For her, July and August are the most food insecure months as there is no work available in the village, and it is also the time the family comes back as the son has to appear for exams. The only consolation for her is that when her son is in the village, he gets at least one full meal in the school. Also, the family is a beneficiary of *Antyodaya Anna Yojna* and gets rice for three rupees a kilogram. It is not the food insecurity alone that worries Nirvani, it is the loneliness when all the family members migrate. She complains of constant weakness and the village has advised her to eat nutritious food. Often her niece takes care of her when she is really sick, but she says that 'one cannot expect this attention all the time.'

Nirvani faces food insecurity like any other poor person but what makes it worse for her is the loneliness, the burden of cooking for oneself. 'Even if I have food in my house, I do not feel like eating, because I am not sure how my family is surviving in an unknown place,' she says. Nirvani adds: 'There are many problems which you cannot share with others. Even when you feel like crying out your problems, people are not interested in listening to them.'

## 7. Sankari Boriha

Sankari Boriha's life, at the age of seventy, has come full circle. At a young age, she became an orphan and now with five children she still has no one to take care of her and leads a lonely existence.

When she was merely four months old, Sankari lost her mother. Sankari's aunt took care of her. When she was barely two, her father also passed away. Sankari was then sent to live with her grandparents. Her grandfather worked as a bonded labourer and his earnings were not enough for them to survive for the whole year. Their main source of livelihood was forest products which her grandmother collected.

From a very young age, Shankari also started going to the forest with her grandmother, mainly to collect *tendu* leaves and forest produce so that they had something to eat. Sankari still remembers how frightened and scared she was of the forest. There was no escaping from the forest as *tendu* leaves provided the much needed small amount of cash, as they used to sell it in the market for bidis. It was also her grandmother's way of initiating her into a life of self-sufficiency. This was to prove immensely helpful to Sankari later in her life and helped her to keep herself and her children alive. Even though her grandmother used to constantly go to the forest, there were days when hunger could not be warded off and both the old and young slept hungry. During intense drought, when even the forests dried up, their main worry and thoughts revolved around how to get their next meal.

At an early age, Sankari was married to a man who was an orphan like her and worked as a bonded labourer. He did not own any land so it meant that they both had to work. Sankari's life was a reflection of her grandparents' lives, both of whom worked. One year after her marriage, Sankari got pregnant which meant she could not go to the forests. The only food on which they both had to survive was the annual remuneration of 1.2 quintals of paddy. Over the next six years, Sankari went to the forests infrequently as she gave birth to four children, two girls and two boys. Sankari's children did not go to school and there was never enough to eat.

When the household was reeling under chronic food insecurity, Sankari became pregnant with her fourth child. Her husband's health gradually started declining. Sankari says that she saw and



could feel that her husband needed to rest, but there were so many mouths to feed that her husband had no option but to work. They both knew that even if one day of work was missed, there would be no food in the house to feed the children. But a day came when her husband fell sick and started vomiting blood. He was bedridden and no one was ready to lend her money as 'everybody knew that helping such a family would be throwing water in the river,' as she put it. Soon after Sankari gave birth to a son, her husband died. Sankari saw it all happen but was helpless. However, she is grateful that her maternal uncle's children ensured that the last rites were performed in a proper manner.

With four children, one barely a few days old, Sankari's told us that she was in complete shock. For a few days, her relatives helped her but soon help started dwindling. Her children constantly came to her and asked for food, but she was in no position to go out to work. The children started begging from other houses and brought some leftovers for her. Sankari, who from her childhood had lived with hunger and depended on the forest for food, had never begged. But she spent the next two years begging for food and sustained her four children. She says she had no other option as she could not go to work leaving behind her small children. Begging and soliciting did not mean they were able to get enough food. It was a period of drought and everyone in the village was running short of food.

When her youngest son was old enough to be left with her eldest daughter, she started going back to the forest, and for the next few years, the family was totally dependent on forest produce. The leaves and roots collected from the forest were their only food; they never saw rice and grain in the house. Sankari used to collect bamboos that were soft and small, and the paste of it was eaten by all of them. Another frequent meal comprised of *kaddi*, a poisonous product which had to be treated for many hours to make it edible. To make it taste better for her children, she used to mix it with jaggery and salt and boil it in water. June and July for Sankari were



Sankari was completely in shock.



good periods as she could collect wild fruits (*thol* and *kusum*) and used to exchange them for broken rice and salt. During rainy season, the whole family could taste meat as she managed to collect snails. When she was able to get work in the fields, she used to get some grain.

As her children started growing up, they proved to be an asset for Sankari; both the sons started working as bonded labourers. Her daughter too helped her with collecting food from the forest. Gradually, the flow of cash increased as the sons started migrating to work in brick kilns in the city. The house that had never been able to provide them shelter in the rainy season was mended and rebuilt. The situation further improved as Sankari herself started getting a pension. In the meantime, the two daughters were married with the money that the sons sent. However, for Sankari, the problems re-emerged with the marriages of her sons: her younger son decided to stay with his wife's family, leaving Sankari all alone. The elder son had already been adopted by his maternal uncle's son and the daughters were settled with their own families.

At this age, her only source of income was her old age pension, and from the last three months, her pension had increased to 200 rupees. The entire money was used by Sankari to buy rice. However, the rice was not enough to last the whole month. To support herself, Sankari works whenever she gets work. None of her children offer any support. One might expect bitterness from a person who has endured so much to bring them up, but with Sankari, there is only sorrow and pain. She says: 'I do not want anything from them. They work and live on their own. It is enough if they are able to take care of their children and themselves.'

### 8. Nrupati Bariha

Nrupati Bariha is a seventy-year-old widow. She has worked all her life in poverty to live with dignity. But now Nrupati is beyond shame and the stigma attached to soliciting and begging. When we went to meet her, her neighbours told us she had gone begging in the

nearby village. After a little while, Nrupati came back from the other village. What we saw was not a woman of 70 years. She looked much older, hungry and anxious about her survival.

Nrupati was born poor. This could have been one of the reasons she has no recollection of her days as a child. What she remembers is in fragments. Her clearest memories are of when she was 15 years old. Her family comprised six members, four of them children. Since the other three children were boys, they started working early in life as child labourers. More often than not, the whole family had to resort to eating forest produce. Nrupati used to go to the nearby forest with her parents often to collect *tendu* leaves, *kandi* and other fruits. Her father cut bamboos and also forest products out of which ropes are made. The earning from bamboos and ropes was crucial as they were sold in the market and not exchanged for other goods.

Contrary to her childhood memories, each event of Jhilee's (her husband's) life is etched in Nrupati's memory, a life that was not only defined by poverty but also marred by tragedies. Nrupati was Jhilee's third wife. Jhilee's parents had no property and assets, but since Jhilee was the only child, their existence was better than hers. Jhilee, like other poor children, soon started working as a bonded child labour. However, a little later in his life, Jhilee started to work on his own as a casual worker, mainly in bamboo cutting and stone carrying at construction sites.

When Jhilee reached marriageable age, he was married to a girl from the same village. However, soon after giving birth to a daughter, both his wife and child died. After this, Jhilee again started working as a bonded labourer. Soon he was married to another woman, and they had a son. The son died ten days after his birth and his wife left him.

Jhilee, now a broken man, did not want to live in his village, so he shifted to another village where his aunt lived. The aunt had no children of her own and was happy that Jhilee had come to stay with her and her husband. She even had three acres of land and Jhilee started working on it, supporting his aunt and uncle. In the



meantime, the land that Jhilee was cultivating as his own was sold by his uncle without informing Jhilee or his aunt.

When his uncle passed away, Jhilee and his aunt came to know that they did not possess any land. Jhilee then had to start working for other people to sustain himself and his aunt. Once while Jhilee was away, the aunt fell very ill and when he came back, he saw her all alone and sick. It was then that Nrupati was married to Jhilee. Nrupati says food was not a problem at that time since Jhilee worked hard and earned well. For the three of them, it was a comfortable life. Nrupati did not have to work like other women in the village as whatever Jhilee earned was enough for both of them. They even managed to save some money, and Jhilee even bought her a pair of gold earrings and some bronze utensils. After seven years, Jhilee's aunt and father died.

Jhilee's health began to deteriorate after this. Nrupati, totally dependent on Jhilee's earnings, began to face difficulties and ill-health started haunting both of them. Once Jhilee became grievously ill and could not go to work for four or five days. The employer did not pay him the money, and this incident was important to Nrupati, as both the husband and wife felt betrayed. Jhilee, who had worked for the same employer for a long time, felt sad that he was not sympathetic towards him when he was away from work for just four days.

Jhilee's health worsened and he also started consuming liquor. However, he never sold any of the household items or rice for liquor. He drank only when he had extra money. But he was getting weaker by the day, and gradually a time came when no one was ready to give him work because of his illness. The only work left was that of bamboo cutting but that required a lot of hard work and Jhilee could not cut enough bamboo to sustain himself and Nrupati. They then had to resort to selling utensils. Once the process of mortgaging and selling started, it became irreversible and so did Jhilee's bad health. Eventually, the gold earrings had to be sold for Jhilee's treatment. Nrupati was diagnosed with arthritis. Thus the possibility

of her earning was also gone.

Left with no money and assets, Jhilee died. Then there was neither anyone to support Nrupati nor to look after her. She said: 'Since my husband's death, I have never got two proper meals.' She started working at other people's homes and did jobs like cleaning cowsheds, husking rice and selling fruits picked from the forest. But after two years, her arthritis took a turn for the worse and though Nrupati never wanted to beg, she had little choice. The pain and stigma of not having children in an area where procreation is considered a cardinal duty had numbed her so much that she did not want to even speak about it.

Nrupati had lost all hope for the future. By her own admission: 'It would have been better had I died. There is no point in living a sorrowful life like this.' She had sold her bronze utensils to treat her arthritis. What hurt her more was not selling them but the fact that 'those utensils were memorable articles for me. However, due to my illness, I had to sell them for just 400 rupees.'

The fear always present in Nrupati's mind is that of falling sick. She tells us that whenever she is sick, she is totally at the mercy of others and eats whatever they give her. 'My neighbours take pity on me and give me something to eat. If they didn't, I would die,' she says. Nrupati is not totally dependent on begging. When the weather is fine, she irrigates her neighbour's vegetable patch and in return gets tea and *mudhi*.

Before Jhilee's death, Nrupati had got an Annapurna card. With that she gets ten kilograms of rice, which is not sufficient for her. Her only desire is that somehow she gets a widow's pension or *Antyodaya* card, and also her arthritis gets cured so she can work. 'I always pray to God to make me healthy so that I can go to work and earn a living,' she says.

### 9. Tanudeep

Tanudeep, at 60, is a broken man. All his life, he tried to fight with both poverty and hunger. Tanudeep's biggest regret and also his



biggest question is why did his family have to face tragedies one after the other? Tanudeep belongs to the Dalit community and a sub-community known for its traditional art of playing drums and for dancing. Thus, in addition to casual work, Tanudeep had his art which provided him with additional money. But for this, he had to go to far off places like Raipur and Madhya Pradesh to marriage functions and festivals. These tours, though they provided him with the much-needed money, were seasonal in nature. Thus, for at least six months in a year, Tanudeep worked as a bonded labourer in the fields.

Even after working all year round, Tanudeep was not able to provide for enough food for his family. One of the main reasons for this was his wife's pregnancy. This meant that she could not work, and only Tanudeep's income was available to run the household, which was clearly not enough as there were also additional expenses due to pregnancy. Often, he had to leave his pregnant wife behind and go to other states to perform. These were the times when his wife, who required more food and rest, had to go and work in the fields. Once when he had to leave for a month, there was just 1.5 kilograms of grains in the house and nobody to take care of his wife. The situation was such that even in an advanced stage of pregnancy, she had to work so that she could get two proper meals. This pattern was repeated almost all the four times they had children. Often, her children and she had to sleep on empty stomachs. Though Tanudeep's brothers lived nearby, they could not be of much help as they also left for work in the drum-beating season. The condition of their households was similar to that of Tanudeep's and so even if they wanted to help, they could not have.

Due to such conditions at home, they lost three children at an early age and were left with one boy. The first child was a boy who died within a year, the second child was a girl. When she was one month old, she got ill and they took her to a traditional healer. However, the child could not be saved. The third child, a son, died

when he was twelve years of age. His death was a traumatic experience for both husband and wife and his death was also too sudden for them to get any help.

Despite these shocks, most of which were caused due to malnutrition and hunger, Tanudeep with his eldest son (the only surviving one) and wife began to work hard. At this stage, he wanted to leave the profession of drum-beating as somehow he saw the link between his family's disintegration and going away for drum-beating. But he also wanted to pass on this art to his son. The elder son had also grown up and had started working as a bonded labourer in the village. Tanudeep's earnings had also increased. He was earning 500 rupees per performance, his son was doing very well.



Tanudeep faced a series of tragedies due to hunger and malnutrition.



He bought a goat, and gradually, with savings, they were able to buy four acres of land and some gold for Tanudeep's wife.

Tanudeep's elder son's marriage was arranged as he was 20 years of age. Eight days before his marriage, his son got high fever and heart pain. This time Tanudeep did not want to take a chance and immediately took him to the nearest hospital. But despite all efforts, Tanudeep's son died in the hospital at the young age of 20. Tanudeep and his wife were shattered. They were now just left with an infant son. Tanudeep sold all the goats and also his drums, as they reminded him of his lost sons. For one year, Tanudeep was totally immobile: he did not go to work, neither did he care about repaying the debt incurred at time of his son's death. He gradually came to terms with reality; after all he had one more son who was in class six.

Both husband and wife now work in their own field and also take up other work if it is available. The income now is drastically reduced as drum-beating fetched good money. One thing they are very particular about is that they will never send their only child to work as a bonded labourer. Food insecurity is something they are living with yet again. They mostly eat rice and vegetables (which they barter with grains from their fields), but they cook only at night. In the mornings, they consume rice water from the previous night.

Food crisis is intense during the months of July and August as the grains from last year get exhausted by this time. During such distress periods, Tanudeep either borrows money or sells/mortgages the vessels in the house and manages. The common food during distress period is broken rice water with turmeric, and dried mango (*letha*). Another common food during these times is water rice with one tomato or brinjal or chilly with a little salt. Tanudeep is a beneficiary of the Indira Awas Yojna, but till now no construction work has been done on his house. He also has a BPL card and feels thankful for that, especially during the crisis months when at least the BPL ration is assured. The fear of losing his last surviving child

is so great in Tanudeep's mind that he never ever migrates for work, not even to the nearby villages.

### 10. Urmila

For Urmila, the only precious thing that she has at this age is not any material asset but fond memories of her happy childhood. These are the memories she clings to, on the one hand, but, on the other, she fervently desires to forget. She kept saying: 'I hardly want to remember my past.'

Unlike other poor people, Urmila had not seen hunger as a child; she came from a prosperous family. Her father had seven acres of land and cattle. She was not expected to work in the fields unlike other girls her age; she tells us that still at times she used to go to work to accompany her friends rather than to earn money for her family. Whatever money she earned was used by her to purchase things she fancied.

Urmila fondly remembers the village waterfall where she used to go and play for hours. When she was thirteen years of age, she was kidnapped by two women from near the waterfall, and taken to village Tuttbatta. Urmila does not remember much as she was so scared that she fainted. When she regained consciousness, she found herself in a strange house. The very same day she was married to a man who was forty years of age, and the women who had kidnapped her became her sisters-in-law. Thus, from a thirteen-year-old child, Urmila became the second wife of man who was old enough to be her father.

Later, Urmila came to know that the marriage was a combination of revenge and a strong desire for procreation. In her husband's family, except for the eldest brother, the other three brothers had no children. It was mutually decided in the family that the youngest brother should be married again so that there would be children in the family. For this purpose, her husband's brothers had gone to meet Urmila's father who was enraged when the proposal was put before him.



After her marriage, Urmila was confined to a room for 15 days, and her only thought was how she could go back home. After 15 days, her parents were informed and told about Urmila's fate. Her father and brother were enraged when they came to know about the incident. They had taken Urmila as dead and had thought she was carried away by the water flow at the waterfall. After much deliberation in the *panchayat*, it was decided that since the marriage had already taken place, nothing could be done except to provide security to Urmila. It was decided that a piece of land was to be given to her by her husband and added to it was the decision that both sides would pay a fine of 751 rupees, which was to be used for a community feast.

For Urmila, her fate was sealed the day she was kidnapped. Her anger now was more directed towards her father. She felt bitter that her family did not stand up against the *panchayat*. She tells us that her father gave her a necklace for her wedding which she never wore; it was only through such symbolic acts that Urmila could show her anger. She was also very bitter towards her husband and she used to humiliate him by saying: 'You look like my father.' However, the desire for children was so great within the family that she was treated well and given nutritious food.

Urmila soon became pregnant and strangely enough, she became quite close to the woman (her elder sister-in-law) who kidnapped her and started trusting her. However, when nine months had passed and still there was no sign of the baby, the family started getting worried. Urmila became the recipient of taunts. Though her husband's family was not poor by any standards and food was not a problem, her husband started complaining and telling her that she ate a lot. Taking a cue from her husband and others in the house, the first wife also started humiliating her. Meanwhile, Urmila's stomach had swelled disproportionately and the pain was becoming unbearable. By now the taunts had turned into curses and everyone was sure that there was no child but that she had brought disease in the family. Urmila says nobody was bothered about the

excruciating pain that she was going through; her health was in such a condition that she could not even move and was sure that she would die. Seeing her condition, some villagers informed her parents about it and her father immediately came and took her to the primary health care centre in a bullock cart. Her only desire at that time was to die as the pain had become unbearable and even a small movement was agony.

In the meantime, her husband realised that she was of no use as she had failed for the very purpose she was kidnapped. He had started divorce proceedings. It was easier to get a divorce from the *panchayat* on the grounds of her not being able to bear a child.

In the hospital, she came to know that she was carrying a baby and also that she could not be treated in the primary health centre due to lack of facilities. A complicated surgery was required to save her life, and so her father then took her to a private hospital. But the doctors refused to perform a surgery if the money was not given beforehand. Left with no choice and unable to see his daughter dying, her father started begging for money and help inside and outside the hospital. After a few hours, he was able to collect 400 rupees and fell at the doctor's feet to perform the surgery.

Urmila's father became so desperate that he pledged to the doctor that he and his daughter would work for them for their entire lives. The doctor and his wife took pity on Urmila and performed the surgery. Once the operation was over, her father went to Urmila's husband's place and sold the land that was in her name. Urmila was too frail to leave the hospital, so she stayed back at the doctor's house and did small household chores. It was a way of repaying them back for the operation.

After a year of staying at the doctor's home, Urmila came back to her parents' home but despite the divorce proceedings, her husband's sister came to take her back to Tuttibatta. Urmila went with her but she did not tell us the reason why she left her father's place. In Tuttibatta, Urmila stayed with her sister-in-law: she did not go to her husband's house. Though her sister-in-law took good



care of her, Urmila again fell ill. She was not able to digest food properly and her stomach started bulging again. Her condition turned worse to the extent that at such a young age (hardly 17 years), she had to walk with the help of a stick.

This time the village chairman took Urmila to her father's house. Urmila's father sold his own piece of land and with the money got her admitted in a hospital. Urmila stayed in the hospital for two months. Once discharged, she did not go to her maternal home, probably realizing that they had already done enough for her. Soon her mother and father died. In Tuttibatta, she started living with her sister-in-law who treated her like her own daughter and did as much as she could for her. Till then, Urmila had suffered ill-health but after that it was hunger and ill-health that dogged her. Urmila started doing household work and agricultural labour that was available.

Within a few years, her husband died childless. According to Urmila's own admission, nothing changed for her since he didn't mean anything to her. The year after her husband's death, Urmila recalls that there was a drought and the crops had failed. Left with no food, Urmila and her sister-in-law started going to the forest in search of food. For a whole year, fruits and flowers from the forest became their staple diet. During the time of drought, the government launched a free food scheme but the food was not sufficient. At times, they were not able to collect fruits from the forest and had to survive only off 'government food.' These were also the times when they had to eat one meal and sleep on an empty stomach in the night. Soon the government launched a 'food for work' scheme in the village. Her brother-in-law (to whom she was like a daughter) took up this scheme.

Though he got pulses and rice sufficient for the three of them, the hard work was taking its toll on him and he fell ill. His whole body swelled. With no money in the house, the only option left was to sell the agricultural land that had already depleted during her husband's illness. Since there was no buyer due to the prevailing

drought, the land was sold for a mere 100 rupees. However, all the efforts were wasted as her brother-in-law did not survive. Now the household consisted of two single women with no land or material assets. There was no change in the drought condition, and both women now were solely dependent on the forest. Urmila says that for many consecutive days they used to boil *mahua* and eat it, and in the nights food was never available. The food situation in the village was getting worse daily; even the forest resources were depleted. Both Urmila and her sister-in-law migrated to Sambhalpur for three months in the hope of finding work.

After this, both Urmila and her sister-in-law took turns to migrate for work to nearby towns. When Urmila returned from one such migratory trip, she found her sister-in-law on her death bed. Urmila could not afford treatment and her sister-in-law died in a few days. Now all alone, Urmila had neither the support nor love that her sister-in-law provided. However, at times, people in the village help her. At first, she had no cot to sleep on. Some villagers made a cot for her. Sometimes they give her food, but only when she is in dire need. The chairman of the village gives her 15 kilograms of paddy every year, but despite community support, there are days when she goes without food. Urmila maintains that it is not the hunger that hurts her but the attitude of her immediate relatives.

Urmila worries that she has not been able to perform the last rites of her sister-in-law, because she did not have money for it and had nothing to sell either. She cannot work as so many health shocks have rendered her weak. For food, she mostly depends on the community and the forest. From the forest she collects wood, *mahua*, wild fruits and vegetables. She says: 'If there is no vegetable or rice in the house, I go to nice and rich people in the village who eat good food and ask them to give me some, and this is how I continue to live. Some people in the village take pity on me and give me rice, papaya, vegetables etc.'

Hunger is only one of her worries. She is also a phobic about



people: she does not like interacting with people and is scared of crowds. In the night, Urmila bolts her door from inside before sunset and even a small sound scares her. She waits for hours in the night to go to the toilet as she is scared of going anywhere alone.

## NOTES ON METHODOLOGY

"The world, or reality is not fixed, single, agreed upon or measurable phenomena that it is assumed to be in positivist, quantitative research"<sup>9</sup>

Qualitative research is based on the assumption that there are multiple realities and that reality in itself is amenable to varying interpretations. This is the main characteristic that distinguishes qualitative research from quantitative research. Even within qualitative research, the research question leads to different kind of strategies, research designs and evaluation criteria that need to be followed.

Since this research dealt with complex social phenomenon and processes, and the study was geared towards understanding the experiences and 'lived reality' of vulnerable people—in the contexts of food insecurity and the multiple ways in which social exclusion and food insecurity affect social agents in their day-to-day lives—the ethnographic method was considered apt.

The research design was framed in a manner which privileged the perspectives of the social agents so that a faithful rendering of their daily struggle could be understood. For this purpose, tools that are central to ethnographic methods were used in the study. The study relied on life history, participant observation, field notes and in-depth interviews for data collection.

For the purpose of in-depth interviews and life history narratives,

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9 Merriam et al (eds), *Qualitative Research in Practice Examples for discussion and Analysis*. (2002, Jossey –Bass, San Francisco) 3.



we made a checklist of topics to be covered that would guide the researchers. However, it was kept fairly flexible keeping in mind local realities. The above approach was helpful as the local actors were able to express their opinions on matters that they themselves considered to be important in the context of food insecurity.

### **Sampling Strategy**

Random and representative sampling was not undertaken since the groups that we were dealing with were highly invisible and thus random sampling would not have given us the correct picture. Also, our concern was more to understand multiple patterns of social exclusion and the processes of impoverishment that lead to food insecurity among certain groups. A sampling strategy that took into account detailed analysis was required. Also, in a situation where the population is invisible and is a minority, one of the best sampling strategies for identification is that of 'snow-balling'. As a triangulating strategy, key informants were also interviewed to know about the people falling in the three groups.

### **The Research Team**

A team of six researchers and one translator were part of the research. The members of the team included one disabled person, one old person without caregivers, and one single woman. The underlying logic was that people in the same circumstances would be able to understand the experiences of others in similar conditions in a more humane and empathetic manner. The other three members were NGO workers who knew the area and had worked on similar issues who would document the experiences of the respondents. It was also decided that in total, the research team would have a total of three women but in the field in Andhra Pradesh, there were only two women.

The choice of the community researcher and local NGO researchers was also guided by the fact that food insecurity, social exclusion and hunger are intensely personal issues and people would

be hesitant to talk about them, characterised as they are by shame and stigma. Thus gaining entry and access to the lives of the subjects might be difficult for a research team as there would be no shared similarity of experience. Further, talking about and discussing highly sensitive issues require a certain amount of bonding, interpersonal relationship and trust, only possible, we felt, with persons who have faced similar situations.

### **Data Collection Tools and Methodologies**

In each state, we aimed for a total of 30 life histories from each category in all the three villages. This aim was achieved in all the three states, except in Orissa where 30 life histories from each category were collected from two villages only. The process of interviewing was done in the local languages, translated into Hindi and later into English. To ensure accuracy in translation, three NGO researchers who had good knowledge of both the languages were chosen. The translation from Vagadi to Hindi, Telugu to English and Oriya to English was conducted at the end of each day.

### **Ethnography**

Data was collected using innovative methodologies and tools. Ethnography was prominent among them. Ethnography is a qualitative research method based on detailed, in-depth description of phenomena under study. The goal of ethnographic research is to understand the way of life and experiences of people/groups in their own settings. Ethnography strives to understand the worldview of a particular group or particular phenomenon as the group itself defines it, and further how such experiences shape their answers as well as their lives as a whole. To accomplish this, the team relied on close, personal observation, personal experiences and participation in the life of the community or group.

One of the main reasons for using the ethnographic method was because the lived experiences of individuals belonging to these groups were not amenable to survey methods. In surveys, the



answers are usually in the form of 'yes' or 'no', which are not able to take the context and lived experiences of the people. Also, in certain situations, people would not give straight answers as they are too difficult to be put in simple 'yes' or 'no' format. Ethnographic methods are ideal when such issues need to be dealt with, that is when the aim is to capture the subjective experiences of human beings. As such, experiences could only be understood through observation, immersion in the surroundings as well as understanding the nuances of unspoken words and actions.

The other reason for not using the survey method was that people might not be very comfortable answering direct questions about the vulnerabilities they face. It was also understood that there would be issues that would require use of methods other than that of observation, participation and field notes. Keeping this in mind, the study also used action research methods like focus group interviews, social and resource mapping, and seasonal charts.

### **Ethnographic Tools**

Ethnographic research employs different methodologies and tools. The important ones among them are interviews, observation, participation and secondary analysis of documents and archives. In this research, the main ethnographic tools employed were:

- Participant Observation
- Qualitative Interviews
- Life Histories
- Field Notes

Though the main focus of the study is on ethnographic tools, certain PRA techniques were also employed. These included:

- Resource Mapping
- Social Mapping
- Focused Group Interviews

### **Resource Mapping**

Resource mapping was used as a tool to learn about the community, its resources and how people perceive these resources. In this, a

group of socially excluded people themselves had to develop the map according to what was important to them, like Public Distribution Shops, places of worship, primary health centres, water sources, food sources, agriculture, land or roads. The maps also showed the location of resources within the village, and how distant socially excluded groups are from vital necessities. The researchers were to undertake resource mapping with the three groups separately and in all selected villages.

### **Social Mapping**

Social mapping exercises were undertaken to find out the social structure and institutions in the villages. This exercise was able to bring out the social and economic differences between groups and what people think about social structures and institutions.

### **Participant Observation**

Participant observation is an ethnographic technique that requires the researcher to participate, observe and introspect about the life of the individual/group under study. Participant observation was one of the central research tools used in the second stage of the study. For the purpose of participant observation, the researchers were required to stay with the groups under study and as much as possible participate in the daily lives of these people (ceremonies, social events, food preparation), while at the same time observe their activities.

The aim of 'participant observation' was that the researchers not only 'see' but also 'feel' or at least try to feel what it is like to be a socially excluded person, and then reflect on it. The researchers were supposed to identify phenomena/ things and life processes that are taken for granted and internalised by the people. In this way, we tried to ensure that the hidden meanings, symbols and emotions of people were not lost on the researchers. Thus the researchers' sensitivity and dedication to seeing things beyond the immediately observable was important.



### **In-depth qualitative interviews**

There were no structured questionnaires or interview schedules. A researcher was supposed to converse with the respondents around these issues. However, if the researchers felt that other issues were also important, they were free to pursue them. There were no questions to ask, but discussion of the issues that are listed below was to be generated:

- Perception and experience food security and poverty
- Exclusion by villagers
- Ways of coping with food shortages
- Cooking during festivals
- Celebration of major festivals
- Daily food management
- Food choices
- Children and food
- Employment and work
- Structural factors around work
- Help with food shortages
- Material conditions over time
- Ration shops and their experiences of them
- Credit from shops
- Role of government in their lives
- Changing culture, family/kinship structures/relation in relation to hunger
- Ideas of the future
- Participation in social events
- Religious obligations
- Dramatic events/turning points
- Patterns of systematic impoverishment—selling jewellery, mortgaging land etc
- Awareness of state-run food and employment schemes such as PDS, AAY, Annapurna Anna Yojana, Old age pension, NMBS, NFBS, MDMS, ICDS, SGRY, NREGS and other state schemes?
- Sense of basic entitlements, eligibility to access and the required processes to become a beneficiary for these schemes
- Their experience of these schemes
- Efficacy of the schemes

- Pensions and their experience of access to them
- Political/ interest groups and awareness of them

In order to grasp and fathom these experiences, the technique of one-on-one conversation was found to be most effective.

### **Life History Method**

The main purpose of this method was to capture the subjective experiences of the social agents around the issue of impoverishment, hunger and survival. Crucial to the life history method is its emphasis not only of self-narration, but also on how researchers interpret and describe it. In this sense, life history is not only the story of the narrator but also the story of the narrator through the lenses of the researcher.

### **Field Notes**

The main aim of taking field notes was to gain insights into, and understanding of, social, cultural and 'lived' experiences of people relating to hunger and poverty and how they cope with their vulnerabilities. These field notes were one of the major sources of data and a great help in writing the final report. Writing field notes helped the researchers to see things, hear things, jot down their immediate impressions about the phenomena and later analyse and think about them. In most of the cases, field notes were written while talking to the person or as soon as possible, preferably at the end of the day.

### **Collaborative Ethnography**

Ethnographic studies are generally a work of one individual in which the focal point is the ethnographer's interpretation of phenomena under study. To avoid excessive reliance on the interpretation of just one person, it was decided to undertake collaborative ethnographic study. The advantage of this method was that it took the focus away from one individual researcher and adopted a more interdependent approach. Through collaborative ethnography,



multiple perspectives of the same phenomena emerged and thus brought about a richer set of interpretations. Different levels of interpretation emerged as the research team comprised of different kinds of researchers (from the community as well as trained researchers) who together brought out different aspects of a phenomenon under study as well as highlighted both the insiders' and outsiders' perspectives.

Keeping in mind the necessity to include native perspective even while retaining the critical outsider's position, the researchers were divided into three categories on the basis of their orientation and what they would bring best to the research exercise. They are:

a) A group of three researchers who were from the three vulnerable groups themselves and thus took into account the vulnerabilities of the specific social groups such as aged persons without care givers/disabled persons/single women heads of households

b) A group of three researchers who had worked with NGOs on developmental and social work.

c) One state research coordinator, who was chosen to collate the research report for the state

### Data Analysis

Data analysis was done by data reduction, coding, content analysis, forming categories and conclusions. The first step that was undertaken was familiarisation with the raw data, which required reading and re-reading the primary data.

The second step, flexible coding, involved placing recurring concepts and experiences under separate categories and labelling them, using letters of the alphabet. Simultaneously, category generation was also done as regularities around processes started emerging in raw data. In the third stage, examples of social exclusion, deprivation, and hunger and food insecurity were written and coded.

### Internal Validity

For cross checking the findings of field research, triangulation as a strategy for internal validity was used. Triangulation of the method as well as data was done. Ethnographic methods were triangulated with PRA techniques whereas data triangulation was done using secondary sources, *panchayat* records as well as talking to the key informants. For the purposes of method triangulation, PRA and RRA techniques were included in the overall methodology. Resource mapping and social mapping were not very useful in Rajasthan as the villages chosen were more or less homogenous in terms of class (with a few exceptions of Jains and Marwaris who were the shopkeepers) and also the community was not very stratified. In hindsight, it can be said that at least one village should have been chosen which showed stratification as then we would probably have more information-rich cases. Similarly, it can be said that in Andhra Pradesh, in place of choosing compact villages, heterogeneous villages should have been researched.

### Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues in any kind of field research mainly revolve around issues of deception, informed consent, confidentiality of data, privacy and covert research. All the ethical issues were taken into account while undertaking the field research. Informed consent was taken in each case before the interview, explaining the objective of the research, the nature of the research, and how it would be used. The issue of confidentiality was also taken into account, as there was also the question of reprisal from socially and economically powerful groups. For the purpose of confidentiality, only the name of the district is given.

### Field and the Reality

The reality of field and theoretical constructs are not necessarily isomorphic: what is planned and what eventually happens in the field do not always coincide. The reason is that field is dynamic



and the exigencies of practical means cannot be envisaged in a priori manner. Also the fact that there are theoretical limitations and generalised theories cannot take into account every local context. Certain objectives had to be diluted; certain research problems became more important than we had envisaged them, and some new problems emerged that were not taken into account.

The issue of migration due to loss of livelihood and as an escape from hunger did not figure as an important issue, at least in the context of Dungarpur. However, as the research progressed, we realised that migration was one of the main coping strategies adopted by men, not only to escape from hunger but also to better their conditions in the long run. The other issue that gained prominence in our field research in one of the villages was that of 'dams vs. people'. In all the narratives in one particular village, dams as a cause for their impoverishment figured prominently. The other important cause of loss of livelihood and impoverishment among people was the loss over forest rights.

In the context of Andhra Pradesh, a culture of suicide was seen not only as an escape from poverty but at certain times was undertaken for reasons that seemed trivial. Suicide thus became a critical factor. Another important factor that became important in the context was loss and degradation of traditional livelihoods like handicrafts, small-scale industries and degradation of forests had contributed to limited coping strategies. Prevalence of bonded labour in overt and covert forms was another crucial aspect that we had not taken into consideration.

In Orissa, it was found how migration is not only a way to escape from poverty but it has also become ingrained within the culture of people; what we were witnessing was the evolution of new kind of 'wandering tribes'.

We witnessed at places people deliberately identified people they knew as belonging to one of the social groups (in spite of clarifying at the outset that there was no monetary gain attached to the field research) and this helped us reach our target numbers.

### Limitations of Methodology

Ethnographic methods that were used for the study seemed to be quite effective, and seemed like a very practical and successful methodology. Some of the limitations were:

1) In Orissa and Andhra Pradesh, space to stay within the villages was not always available. It was a large team of 7-8 researchers, and we could not be accommodated in any of the houses there. Particularly in Andhra Pradesh, the larger houses were of the *sarpanch* or Reddys and to stay there would be to stay with excluders and study the excluded. Therefore, the researchers had to stay in the town nearest to the villages. However, it was ensured they spent the maximum period of time in the field to strengthen observation. In Orissa, the same kind of problem cropped up and eventually the team had to stay in a school building. However, such problems were not faced in Rajasthan.

2) The villages selected for the study were near to each other and, therefore, had similar socio-economic and cultural set-ups. In retrospect, we can say that a better strategy would have been selection of heterogeneous villages, as it would have led to diversified knowledge. This was one glaring limitation that came up in the Rajasthan study (Dungarpur): all the three selected villages were dominated by the Bhil tribe and more or less shared similar practices. However, the positive side of it was that we were able to highlight the situation of hunger and social exclusion of invisibilised groups.

3) It follows obviously that it is not only difficult but also impossible to claim that the report manages to do justice to the different perspectives of all the researchers. Any claim in this regard would not be possible, as it would mean that the person actually drafting the report would act in an objective manner. This, one would agree, would be impossible. Especially when the team has not only diverse perspectives but also various differences, such as levels of education, hierarchies, language etc, which are manifested in unequal power relationships.



## Conclusion

To sum up, one could expect that the processes followed in the research would have facilitated assertion by the community researchers but in the end, this expectation depended completely on the scope given by the other members of the research team, who had power of education and other institutional support with them. However, it would not be entirely optimistic to claim that though the perspectives of the researchers were different from the beginning and, on important issues, many times may have remained different till the end of the study, our continuous effort was to encourage and give primacy to understanding of the community researchers and look at issues from the rights perspective that made it possible to claim that it is our combined perspectives that shaped this report.

Whenever there was conflict in fulfilling these two objectives, we tried to analyse the context and reasons behind the differences. In the end, we could fairly say that this report follows a rights-based perspective and is premised on the understanding derived by community researchers with teamwork involving the rest of the researchers.

As we decided that the primary readership we would aim for in this report is civil society groups which work with these different groups, we have chosen a language where the style of presentation aims at them and we report the findings for single women, people with disability and aged persons separately. Though we tried to aim at pre-decided readers, we chose not to avoid abstraction in order to make it available for comparison with other works on hunger and to make it accessible to the general reader.

## Appendix-1

### List of Villages Surveyed

- a) Andhra Pradesh—Ranga Reddy district, Vikarabad block
  - Yerravalli
  - Narayanpur
  - Athveli
- b) Orissa—Bolangir district, Khaprakhol block
  - Buromal
  - Ankamara
- c) Rajasthan—Dungarpur district, Dungarpur and Bichivada blocks
  - Kodyagund
  - Manatgaun Chundavada
  - Holilomda Hiraka



## Appendix-2

### Glossary of Indian Words and Contextual Abbreviations

*Anganwadi*—A crèche for children below six years which function under the Integrated Child Development Scheme of Indian Government

*Abba*—Father

*Adarsh Gram*—A model village programme of Andhra Pradesh state government

*Adda*—An indigenous unit of measurement

*Akshar Mala*—A NGO program related to Education

*Amballi*—A small amount of wheat flour mixed with a lot of water, adding a pinch of salt and some chilly powder, and cooked for some time

*ANM*—Auxiliary Nurse and Midwife, a grassroots level government staff to ensure healthcare in the villages

*Annapurna, Antyodaya, Antyodaya Anna Yojna*—Poverty alleviations schemes of the Indian Government

*Arandi*—Oil extraction mill

*Baasi*—Fermented rice water cooked one day earlier

*Badi*—Fool

*Bahu*—Daughter-in-law

*Banjar*—Barren land

*Ber, billi, char, chilbil, kardi, kendu, kusum, mahua, mahul, thol*—Edible wild fruits

*Bhaaji*—Green leaves gathered from the forest

*Bhils*—A tribal community

*Bhiksha*—Soliciting alms

*Bhikshu*—Monk

*Bidi/Beedi*—Rolled tobacco

*Bora*—A trader

*BPL*—Below Poverty Line

*Chana*—Chickpea

*Chanda*—Voluntary small contributions for organising the weddings of daughters of widows and people with disability

*Chappati/ Roti*—Indian bread made of wheat

*Charsul*—Wild plant used for making ropes

*Chullah*—Makeshift mud stoves

*CPI*—Communist Party of India

*Dakan*—Witch

*Dal*—Pulse/ spicy stew prepared with pulses

*Dalit*—Oppressed community

*Dai*—Maid to help in times of child birth

*DWCRA*—Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas, an Indian Government Scheme

*Fakir*—The word is usually used to refer to either the spiritual recluse or eremite or the common street beggar who chants holy names, scriptures or verses

*Fala*—The Bhil (tribal) hamlet

*Ganja*—Cannabis

*Ganji*—Water which is to be drained out of rice once it is cooked

*Ganna*—A ritual related to marriage

*Ghar Jamai/Ghar Zamia*—The person (especially male) who stays in his wife's (in-laws') home after marriage

*Gongura*—A wild leafy vegetable

*Gram sewaks*—Village level workers

*Gud*—Jaggery / Traditional, unrefined sugar used in India

*Gunia*—Faith-based healing.

*Halia*—A kind of bonded labourer who is old

*Handi*—A cooking pot which may be made of copper, brass, earthenware, iron or even steel

*IAY*—Indira Awas Yojana, a housing scheme of the Indian Government

*Imli*—Tamarind

*Jama tota*—Quack

*Javulu, kangui, taidal, ragulu, korabua*—Inferior quality cereals, not eaten normally

*Jeth*—Elder brother-in-law

*Jhaki*—Mad

*Jowar/ Mandia*—Coarse millet

*Juggan*—A priestly caste



*Kaddi*—A poisonous wild plant  
*Kadla, kadli, haar, kudla, kundla*—Jewellery  
*Kali chai*—Black tea  
*Kanda*—A form of fuel which is made by drying cow dung  
*Khaat*—Wooden bed  
*Khajur*—A wild plant, leaves of which are used to make brooms  
*Kirana*—Grocery  
*Kodha / Kust Rog*—Leprosy  
*Kodra, hama, puar, somi, bhatti, kutti, kurra, sama*—Wild shrubs / grass (some of which are poisonous)  
*Kothari*—Small room  
*Kothi*—Bungalow  
*Kuddo*—A weed that is boiled and then drunk  
*Kutia*—A kind of bonded labourer, especially children  
*Laddoos*—A local dish  
*Letha*—Paste of tamarind  
*Mailo*—Very inferior quality grain given to cattle  
*Makai/makki*—Maize  
*MDO*—Mandal Development Officer, executive functionary of the (??)  
*Mudhi*—Cheap snacks  
*Mung ka dal, biri ka dal, tuar dal*—Different pulses  
*Nautanki*—A commotion, or any activity or display with bustle and excitement  
*Nikah*—Marriage  
*NFBS*—National  
*NREGS / NREGA*—National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme / Act  
*Nukkal*—Fine rice of inferior quality  
*Ojha*—This term has been derived from Sanskrit over time. Literal translations vary, but one such example is "he who controls the spirits on Earth". It is also the name given to the profession of an exorcist  
*Palang*—Bed / A wooden bed  
*Panchayat*—A South Asian political system. 'Panchayat' literally means assembly (*yat*) of five (*panch*) wise and respected elders chosen and accepted by the village community. Traditionally, these assemblies settled disputes between individuals and villages. Modern Indian government has decentralised several administrative functions to the

village level, empowering elected gram panchayats.  
*Patel (village patel) / Patwari / Thekedar*—Village functionaries  
*Patta*—Land document  
*Petha*—Sweets  
*Puri*—Fried dish made of wheat or other flour  
*Raabri*—A broth cooked with makai flour and water  
*Raand*—Widow  
*Raapri*—Hut  
*Ramzan and Bakri Eid*—Festivals of Muslims  
*Randi*—Prostitute  
*Rawa*—Indian wheat, granulated but not pulverised  
*Reddy*—A powerful feudal-agricultural caste in Andhra Pradesh  
*Saag*—Leafy vegetable  
*Sabudana*—Pearl sago  
*Sahib*—Sir, master or lord  
*Salam / sambhar*—Spiced lentil soup  
*Sandhi*—Local brewed country liquor  
*Sankranti*—Hindu festival  
*Sari (saree)*—Traditional dress of Indian women  
*Sarpanch*—Head of the panchayat  
*Seth*—Local money lender  
*Sewai*—A vermicelli-based sweet dish  
*Shiv lingam*—Statue of the deity (Lord Shiva)  
*Sitaphal*—Custard apple / sugar apple  
*Tendu*—Coromandel Ebony (*Diospyros melanoxylon*), also known as *East Indian Ebony*, is a member of the genus *Diospyros* and one of the plants commonly known as ebony. Its leaves are widely used in India for the manufacture of bidis, or hand-rolled tobacco cigarettes.  
*Tezab*—Acid  
*Tora*—Orphan  
*Velgu*—A women's development scheme of the Andhra Pradesh state government which promoted self-help groups for women  
*Vibhuti*—Sacred ash